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POPULAR DETECTIVE

MAY 1953

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POPULAR Detective

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FEATURING

THE DARKENED ROOM

A STORY OF NAKED EVIL

By Bruce Elliott



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This contest consists of puzzles like the **SAMPLE PUZZLE** above. Note how we filled it in . . . how we identified the objects and found that certain letters in the names of the objects stood out from the rest, thus to spell out the name of the famous person pictured at the bottom. Read the explanation carefully.

Note how we identified each object with a word of as many letters as there are boxes in diagram accompanying it. In upper left we filled in word **SHOE**; in upper right, **TIE**. In lower left, **TIGER**; in lower right, **PURSE**. Note that some of the letters fell into boxes with a little circular frame inside. Those "circled" letters, arranged into proper order, spell out the famous name we are looking for.

Here, for example, the "circled" letters are **H T R U**. So we run through the names printed under the puzzle and discover **Babe RUTH**, whose last name is the correct solution, and whose picture you see at bottom.

SAMPLE PUZZLE

SHOE	TIE
TIGER	PURSE
CLUE: A member of baseball's 'Hall of Fame' and one of the greatest figures in Sports	
RUTH	

Solution is One of the Names Below:

Zane **GREY** Henry **CLAY**
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Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

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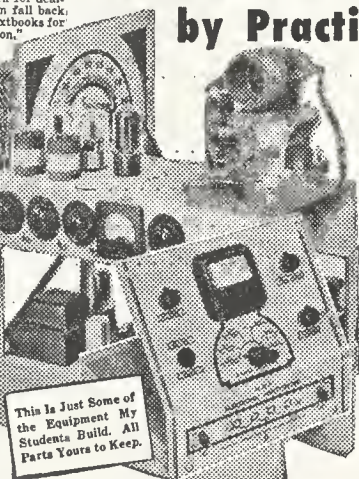
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POPULAR Detective

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MAY,
1953

VOL. XLIV
No. 3

• Featured Novel

THE DARKENED ROOM

By Bruce Elliott

*Who would notice when he slipped into the smoky room?
In that strange dream world—what was a little murder?*

10

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And Marko did produce—the limp corpses of two girls!*

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EVERETT H. ORTNER, EDITOR

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE ARE BRAND NEW

POPULAR DETECTIVE, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter April 14, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1953 by Better Publications, Inc. In communicating with this magazine, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence. May, 1953. Printed in U.S.A.

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INSIDE STUFF

THE LEAST POPULAR CRIME

IT ISN'T strange, when you stop to think about it, that forgery seems the least popular of crimes. The most energetic, if not the greatest forger of all times made only \$26,000 working steadily at his trade for a period of some nine years.

Vrain-Lucas was his name. He was a Frenchman, born about 1818 at Chateaudun. And he did some 27,000 forgeries, which seems to work out at a little less than a dollar apiece—not so good, especially when they purported to be from many of history's most renowned characters to others of the world's great. The fake signatures included Julius Caesar, Herod, Cleopatra, Pascal, Pontius Pilate, Attila, Galileo and a host of others. Strangely enough, Galileo's was the only one written in the supposed correspondent's language.

The rest of them were all in French, which might have struck a less trusting buyer as odd.

Oh, yes, Lucas found a buyer: a renowned French geometrician and a member of the *Académie des Sciences*, one Michel Chasles. A brilliant man, really, and not to be laughed at too much. Lucas did make many mistakes, but at the same time he had put in much time and research on the preparation of the letters.

There was a misleading superficial correctness on all the varied subjects necessary in the wide range of correspondence. And his tale of how he obtained the collection was a masterpiece.

It seems, avowed Vrain-Lucas, that one Comte de Boisjardin emigrated to America with all his worldly possessions, including

the letters. Alas, there was a shipwreck, but miraculously the epistles were saved. Even the few that became water-spotted weren't so bad they couldn't be sold. And the original owner couldn't be questioned as to the authenticity because, alas again, the poor fellow was drowned.

It was really quite a con game the continental was able to work.

Lucas might have been in clover for life if he'd chosen a less benevolent purchaser. But the kind-hearted Chasles, not satisfied with donating his 140,000 francs to Lucas' well-being must needs go further and give some of the letters away. And the recipient was that same *Académie des Sciences* to which he belonged. The *Académie*, ignoring that old adage about gift horses, proceeded to give the teeth a thorough searching and bared their own.

Fraud, they screamed.

That was in 1868, but doting Chasles and dauntless Vrain-Lucas went right on with their buyer-seller combination until 1869 when Chasles' faith finally began to wobble. Then in 1870 the courts took over.

Vrain-Lucas was tried and sentenced. A whopping fine and a two-year sentence might have stopped a less intrepid scribe, but not our Lucas. Out again, off again, in again. The second time he served a three-year sentence.

That did it. While the individual great went right on holding their places in the annals of history, Vrain-Lucas, who for nine years had been *all* the world's great, came out to fade away in the obscurity of petty crookdom. ● ● ●

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



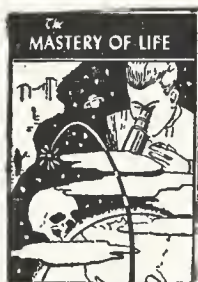
Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

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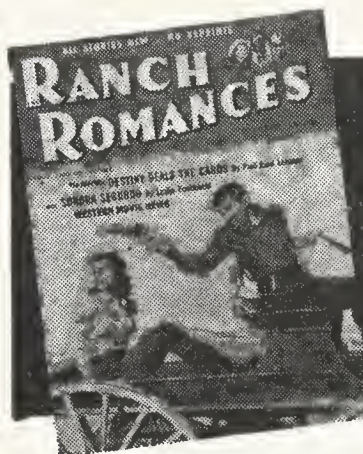
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PD-5



BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS

Are there any friends or relatives with whom you have lost contact through the years and whose whereabouts you'd like to determine? Perhaps there's some old war buddy or former schoolmate or sweetheart you'd like to locate. Let's have the facts and we'll publish them. Tell us the name of the person you are seeking, the last known address, and any other facts that will help in making contact. There is no charge of any kind for this service, but please let us know of your success.

I am 36 years old. I was just a year old when my father, **William R. Golden**, left home to join the Army in 1917. Mother received letters from him for a while, but some time in 1919 when he was stationed with the Army of Occupation in Coblenz, Germany, he ceased writing. Through the War Department we ascertained that he had come home and been discharged in 1920. But we never heard from him again. I have no particular desire to see him, but recently the family came into some money, part of which belongs to him. It is waiting here for him, should he ever turn up. He would be 62 years old if he is still alive. As a young man, he worked at the printer's trade.—*W. R. Golden Jr., 116 Reusen Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.*

My son, **Richard Ames Graves**, left home in January, 1951. He was then 19 years old. I got a postcard from him in March, from Savannah, Georgia, but since then he has not written. It seems hard to believe that if he were well he would not write to me, as he was always a devoted son. It is possible that he is suffering from amnesia, or that he met with foul play. He is 5' 11" tall and weighs about 180 pounds. He has dark brown curly hair and brown eyes. I pray for him night and day.—*Mrs. Robert C. Graves, 8712 Kissena Parkway, Bronx, N. Y.*

During the last war, I was buddies with a guy from Cleveland, Ohio, named **Ward Watson**. After I came home, I wrote him a couple of times, but the letters came back with the notation, "Unknown at this address." If anybody knows where I can get hold of my old buddy from the 253rd Infantry, I'd much appreciate the information.—*Henry Brewer, 383 Santangelo Street, Los Angeles, Calif.*

My mother and I are very anxious to locate her sister, **Sarah Levy**, whom she last saw about 15 years ago in Denver, Colorado. We have heard that she married a man named Wolf (or Wolfe). Aunt Sarah would be 42 years old now. She is about 5' 3" tall, and weighed, when my mother saw her last, about 115 pounds. She has light brown hair and blue eyes. In case she sees this, Mother wants her to know that no one in the family holds anything against her any more, especially now that Grandfather is dead.—*Jean Neuberger, 832 South Wilson Street, Chicago, Ill.*

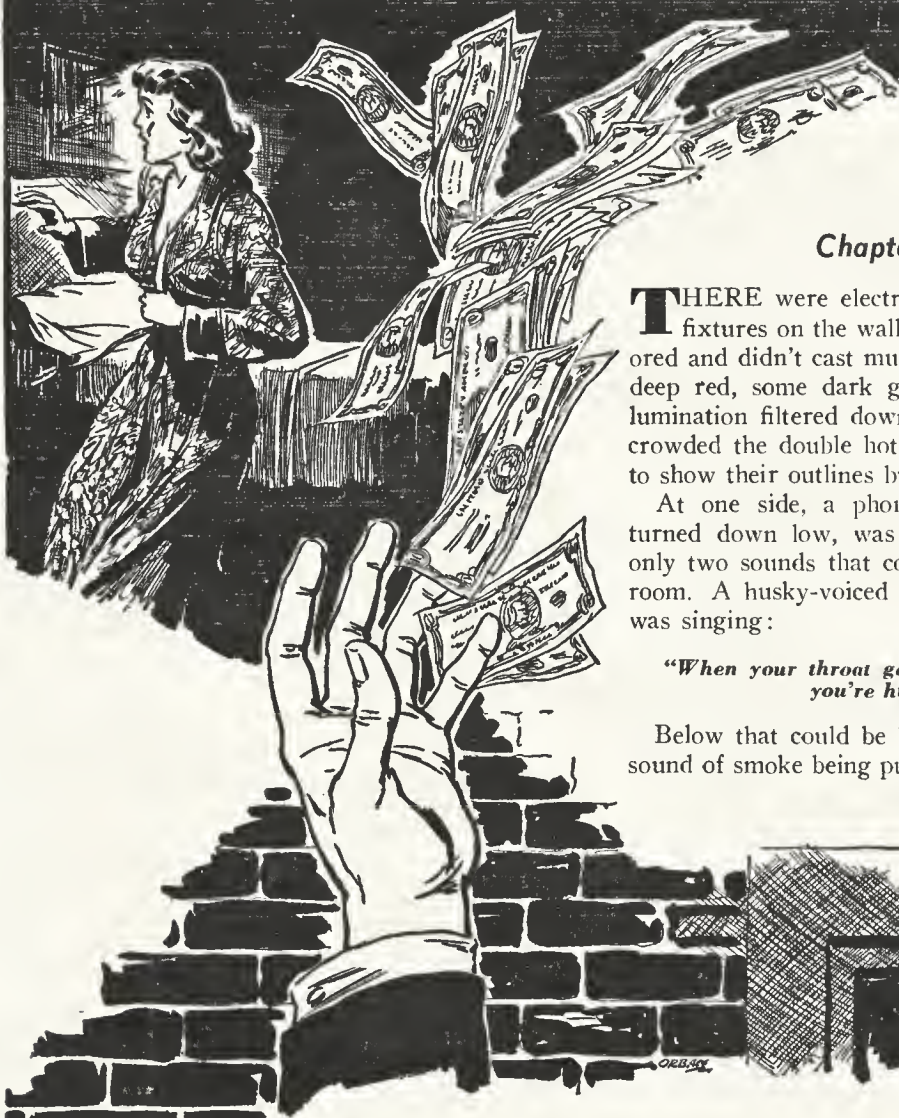
Last January I wrote you and you were kind enough to print a note about my son. Would you be good enough to print this one? His name is **John Russell Hudson**, 16 years old, 6' 3" tall, 196 pounds, medium-dark hair, brown eyes. John: I am under doctor's care constantly. I want you to know that you are not only welcome at home, but wanted and needed. We promise not to interfere in your life. Please, I have been punished enough for loving you. Mother.—*Mrs. Ila J. Gasper, 1621 Arlington Ave., Flint 6, Mich.*

the DARKENED



ROOM

A Novel by BRUCE ELLIOTT



Chapter I

THERE were electric light bulbs in the fixtures on the walls, but they were colored and didn't cast much light. Some were deep red, some dark green; what little illumination filtered down to the people who crowded the double hotel room was enough to show their outlines but not their features.

At one side, a phonograph, its volume turned down low, was making one of the only two sounds that could be heard in the room. A husky-voiced vocalist on a record was singing:

*"When your throat gets dry, you know
you're high."*

Below that could be heard the whispered sound of smoke being pulled into avid lungs.

Who would notice when he slipped into the smoke-filled room? In the marijuana dream world—what was one more murder nightmare?

Fingers curled around the precious reefers as the men and women in the room got their kicks.

Near the door an incense burner was busy trying to camouflage the smell of marijuana by superimposing the sickeningly sweet smell of incense on the already heavy atmosphere.

The reefer lights around the room were there because bright lights are a "bring-down," and when a tea head is getting high he wants to stay there, not get brought out of his condition by any violent contrasts.

The voice on the record chanted:

"—then you're a viper."

In one corner a low-voiced man was making time with a girl he had brought. He was saying, "That's it, baby doll, hold it down, don't let it out of your lungs till you have to."

The eighteen-year-old girl was trying desperately to obey directions, but the acrid smoke hurt her throat, and the crowded room, the air breathed and rebreathed by many lungs was combining to make her feel queasy.

A man who held an eighth of an inch of thin cigarette between the callused ends of his forefinger and thumb, and who, from time to time placed his cupped fingers and the "roach" into his mouth and dragged at it, moved across the room, stepping over the couples on the floor. He made his way to a dark, sullen-faced man whose two-day growth of beard was visible even in the heavy shadows.

The man sucked the last possible bit of drug out of the dinch and asked the sullen-faced man, "What about a couple of broads, Mac? Some of these squares are getting lonesome."

"Yeah."

THE dark man eased the door open and left. In the other room where three women sat, the lights were a little brighter. The man with the heavy beard said to a tall, too slim blonde whose hair color hurt the eyes because of its chemical harshness, "Let's go. Maybe you kids would like to meet some new guys."

Blondie said, "Yeah, we've wasted the best part of the evening already." Turning, she

spoke to the other two women. "C'mon, Betty. Pick it up, Louella."

Louella, who was as stocky and heavy-set as the blonde was thin and light, said, "This was the night I was gonna get home early. I swore to the baby sitter I'd get right back."

The only remotely pretty girl of the trio, Betty, said, "Cut the squawking. To meet a few new guys, it's not bad."

The blonde girl looked at herself appraisingly in a compact mirror and said as they all walked toward the door, "Sometimes I think I'd rather play tag in a poison ivy patch."

The door closed on them.

Downstairs on Forty-seventh Street near Broadway, a man detached himself from the lamp post he had been supporting. He was close to thirty-five and looked older. Thin-faced, long-nosed, with worry lines around his eyes, he hunched his narrow shoulders so that his overpadded jacket would sit more correctly as he walked toward a little tubby man who was reading a horse sheet avidly.

The thin man said, "What room's the tea pad in tonight, Morry?"

Without raising his eyes from the tip sheet, or moving his lips discernibly, Morry answered, "1214, Garrow. Why you wanna know? You're no viper."

"Ya never know, I always say," said Garrow.

Then Morry focused all his attention on the long shot he was trying to handicap.

Bill Garrow turned away from Broadway and walked toward Sixth Avenue. In the middle of the block, identical with all the other hotels that line the street, was the one he was looking for. He didn't pause in front of it but, walking more rapidly he went up the three dirty steps that formed the stoop and into what passed for a lobby in the hotel that called itself the *Elite*.

The ratty lobby was full of what had once been overstuffed chairs. The padding had long since dribbled through tears in the cloth and now the chairs were as misshapen as the elderly, lonely people who sat in them.

Clustered near one poorly dressed seventy-year-old woman were five asthmatic Pekingese. They looked almost as old as their owner, and their fur was matted and dirty.

Not looking down Garrow came too near

the dogs and stepped on one. It snapped and tried to tear at his leg. Unthinkingly he bent down and cuffed the dog. It skittered across the lobby howling in pain.

The old woman yelled for help, and before Garrow quite knew what had happened he was the center of attention.

The old woman said, "You fiend!—poor little Ming Toy, come to Mother! Diddun's bad man hurt little Ming?"

The dog somehow managed to jump from the unwashed tile floor up into its mistress's lap.

The old woman glared at Garrow.

The house detective said, "Be more careful next time, huh?"

Garrow bit his lip. This was the last thing he wanted to have happen. He wondered if, since he had now been noticed by everyone in the lobby, including the dick, if maybe he had better put off what he had in mind.

But his plan was all set, and it would be another week before there was another pad in this particular hotel. It was a rotten break, but possibly not a fatal one.

Stalking towards the elevator he entered it and when it was in motion, said, "Twelve."

LEAVING the elevator he kept his hand in his pocket on the key he knew would open any door in the hotel. Almost unconsciously, he waited till the sound told him that the elevator had gone, then hurried up two flights of stairs.

He walked down the torn carpet that covered the narrow corridor, his eyes busy, looking for the room in which Madigan was waiting for his cut.

1420. There it was. Right ahead of him. He slipped the skeleton key from his pocket and then pausing for just a moment, went over in his mind the various details of what he had to do.

Then he slipped the key into the lock and softly, ever so softly, slid the door open. The unshaded single bulb in the ceiling cast its raw light down over the small room. An unmade bed in one corner almost filled the closet-sized room. A chair, a dresser and a wash basin the management felt filled the requirements of what they called a single, at two dollars a day.

On the rickety dresser a cheap alarm clock ticked time noisily away.

Madigan wouldn't have left the light on unless he had just gone down the hall to the bathroom, Garrow knew, and took advantage of it. He stepped to the right of the door so that he would be momentarily unseen when it opened.

Heavy footsteps warned him that the room's occupant was returning.

Garrow's hands went to his own neck and he loosened his tie. Holding one end in his right hand he looped it around his fingers. He did the same thing with his left hand. About eighteen inches of heavy silk hung between his two hands.

The door opened.

When it closed, Madigan saw his visitor. He said, "Bill Garrow! It's about time you got here! I need the dough for getaway money."

But then he saw the length of cloth in Garrow's hands and his voice died down. For just an instant fright showed on his face, then it was washed away by anger as his hand dived for his hip pocket.

Before it got there, Garrow had leaped, and the cloth was around Madigan's thick neck and it got tighter and tighter.

Almost no sound at all escaped from Madigan's throat. That, Garrow thought, was one of the big advantages to garrotting. The man he was strangling fell to his knees. His thick trunk was arched, his hands tore at Garrow's but they were getting feebler now.

Eyes wide, Garrow stared down at his victim's face. It was changing color fast. Garrow liked that. He loosened his hold a trifle so that death would not come too rapidly. Madigan managed to get a gasp of air into his lungs before the band tightened again.

The oxygen kept him alive perhaps thirty seconds longer than he would have lived without it.

When Garrow was sure that he had succeeded in what he was doing, he pulled the tie from the folds of flesh that had held it, then flipping the tie out, he tied a slip knot in it and carefully replaced the loop around the corpse's neck.

A broken piece of wainscoting up near the ceiling had caught his eye the last time he

had visited Madigan. He used it now. Muscling the unwieldy body onto the bed, he forced the corpse upright.

It took him a little longer than he had figured to tie the free end of the cloth around the break in the wainscoting, but he managed it at last. Stepping down from the bed he moved back from the corpse and considered it.

Then he went to the bed and arranged Madigan's big feet so it looked as if he had arched his body out from the bed, his feet the base of the bow, his neck the top of it. Held by the tie, his face becoming bloated, Madigan looked enough like a suicide to satisfy his murderer.

Garrow reached into Madigan's back pocket and removed the gun that the man had tried to pull. No sense in leaving it. The cops might wonder why a man would choose so painful a death as strangling, when he had a bullet handy to blast into his brain. Only one thing left to decide. Garrow wondered, if he were killing himself, would he do it in the dark? Or in the light? Hard to tell. But he'd better leave the light on, he decided, because otherwise the cops might wonder how Madigan had been able to see in the dark to catch the silk tie on the wood.

Chapter II

LOCKING the door after him, Garrow looked up and down the long, narrow corridor. If he were spotted now he'd be in real trouble. He had to get to the fire-escape at one end of the hall, and he had to get there without being seen.

Tiptoeing, he made his way towards the window that led to the fire-escape.

Pausing often, eavesdropping at the doors as he went, he was prepared for violence at any moment. He'd shoot anyone who spotted him.

He didn't let the pent-up air out of his lungs till he was safely out on the rusting iron of the old fire-escape. Then he looked down, straight down, fourteen floors to the ground. He didn't care for the view much and found himself gritting his teeth to control the vertigo that always affected him when he looked down from heights.

No time for lousing around now!

He raced down the two flights of iron stairs and without pausing ducked through the window on the twelfth floor.

This was the next to the last danger he had to face. If he was seen coming in this window— But no one was in sight.

He knew Room 1214 was nearby, but first he had to find an empty room. Again listening at doors, he had to try four before he heard no signs of occupancy. Then, slipping the key into the lock he eased the door open. No sound, no light. It was safe. Lighting a match, he found the phone and asked the operator for a number. Waiting, he whistled tunelessly.

A harsh voice said, "Police Headquarters. Sergeant Kahan."

Keeping his voice down, Garrow lied, "Listen, this is Blacky. I'm one of Walsh's stoolies. Tell him there's a marijuana party going on at the Elite on Forty-seventh, Room 1214."

Without waiting for an answer, he returned the phone to its cradle and crept out of the quiet room.

So far so good. The hard part was over now. Smiling a little he walked casually down the hall to Room 1214. Tapping it with a "shave-and-a-hair-cut" rhythm, he waited till the door opened a crack, then said;

"C'mon, lemme in. This is Garrow."

The sullen-faced, black-bearded man looked a little surprised. He said, "It's almost over, Garrow. Why waste a finsky?"

"Ah," Garrow said, smiling, "Mac, what's money?"

Handing the man a five-dollar bill he entered the double room of what passed for a suite in the Elite Hotel.

None of the couples in the room even looked at him as he crawled over them and leaned against the wall, where he could see the people in the darkened room as clearly as possible.

Looking around, he tried to spot the stooge with the reefers. Some petting parties were going on.

Garrow finally managed to make out the faces of three girls he knew, but all of them were occupied with their dates. The heavy



The man Garrow was strangling fell to his knees

blue smoke that vipers say smells like a chicken dinner hurt Garrow's eyes. He needed a stick of tea.

The stooge with the stuff worked his way to Garrow's side and held out his open palm. On it was one of the thinly rolled hand-made cigarettes that the others were inhaling so lustfully. Garrow took it and, lighting it, dragged the smoke down into his lungs and held it there for a long moment.

Then the atmosphere no longer hurt his eyes. He could feel his edginess begin to fade away. Three more drags and he could feel the cotton wool beginning to form around his finger tips. There, that was better.

But suddenly he remembered that he

hadn't ditched the gun. The ease supplied by the drug vanished. No sense in taking a Sullivan law violation, that was for sure. Edging past the sprawling couples he made his way to the bathroom.

INSIDE the room he lifted the top of the water closet and dropped Madigan's pistol into the water.

Then looking at himself in the bathroom mirror, he wondered if his lack of a tie looked suspicious. Just for safety's sake he put his shirt collar outside his jacket. He was wearing a sport's shirt, and it looked all right.

As he went back into the double room the outer door slammed open and three uni-

formed. policemen entered. They had their guns out. One said, "This is a pinch. Don't anybody try to beat it. We got the place covered."

White lights clicked on, assaulting drug heavy eyes.

The girls looked irritated more than anything else. It was the men who were really concerned. They looked guilty and shamefaced, Garrow thought, a thin sneer on his own face. The stooge who carried the tea on his person, swore a blue streak and as the others began to file out the door, he slipped an envelope to Garrow and said:

"You're near the window. Throw this the hell out, willya?"

Garrow gauged how far away the police were and decided to take the risk. Holding the envelope of tea behind his back he moved backward to the window. It was open only about six inches but that was enough. He slipped the evidence out.

The stooge whispered, "Thanks, Garrow. I always knew you were regular."

"It's okay."

"No sense in me taking an extra rap, and they can't prove nothin' without the Mary Warner for evidence."

"Sure, sure." Garrow turned away. He wanted to get arrested and have it over with.

The male customers were leaving the room in single file. Garrow got on the end of the line. Two of the cops were pushing the dark man with the heavy beard toward the door. Through the open door into the other room, Garrow could see three girls struggling into their wraps.

Mac, the dark man said to the cops, "What's wrong with you guys? I iced the cap'n on'y last week."

One cop shrugged his shoulders in irritation. "Who knows? Maybe he's mad at you."

"Mad at me? After I been fixin' him for years?" Mac was outraged.

"What are you beefin' about?" the cop asked. "You can stand for a rap. So you get six months on the Island. It won't kill you."

"Six months, hell!" Mac swore again. "I'll get a suspended sentence or I'll know the reason why!"

Dispassionately the cop smashed his nightstick along the side of Mac's jaw. He said, "That wasn't a threat, was it, Mac?"

"Why'n'cha keep your hand to yaself? You coppers are all alike!" Mac had his hand to his swelling face. "I pay off and I pay off, and the next thing I get rapped."

The cop pushed him out the door after the others.

Load after load of arrested men filled the small elevator cages. Garrow was in the last batch to go down and so was able to see the way the policemen treated the girls. He was pleased when Betty smashed her pocketbook in a cop's face, and said, "Keep ya big hands off me, copper!" She spat, and said, "I hate cops!"

The policemen called her a few choice names and then rapped her across the buttocks with his nightstick.

She let out a yell, and the cop, surprised by the volume of sound said, "Shaddup! Or I'll close your mouth for good."

Her epithets were, if anything, even more unlikely than the ones the cop had called her.

The last thing that Garrow heard as the elevator door closed was the cop saying, "You better button your lip or I'll ram your teeth down your throat."

Garrow felt pleasantly excited.

THE feeling persisted even when he had to cross the lobby and stand hearing the old woman with the five dogs say, "See! See! What'd I tell you! He's one of them! Just like I said!"

Outside the lobby Garrow saw the paddy wagon waiting and by the time the old woman finished shouting at him he was almost glad to get into the wagon with the other men. They sat in stony-faced silence. No man wanted any other to look at him.

The ride to the local precinct house did not take long. But it was enough time for Garrow to be able to double-check what he had done. He had been the last one into the wagon and his unseeing eyes looked out the rear door past the patrolman who stood on guard and passed incuriously over the crowd of people who as usual milled around on Broadway, going to, or coming from the movie houses.

But Garrow had seen it all too often to pay any attention even to the girls in their dressed-up best, or the men in their going out clothes. His mind was busy with himself and what he had done.

He had saved four thousand dollars by killing Madigan. It was in a safe place, one that the police would never suspect. The burglary had gone like clockwork right from the moment he had spotted the story about that Hollywood star in the papers and had decided that some of her jewelry must be legit.

As a matter of fact, he thought, the whole thing had gone off swell. He'd pointed out the news item to Madigan, they'd decided to do something about it, and the following night had seen them in the star's Park Avenue apartment.

When they rumbled the joint all they'd had to do was knock out one female servant and go looking for the loot. They hadn't found it. But the answer was obvious. The star must be wearing it. They'd waited patiently, drinking her brandy while they sat around. The one dangerous point in the whole night's work had been when the girl had come in roaring drunk with a guy.

But the guy had left when she got sick. Then Madigan and Garrow had come out of the closet in which they'd been hiding, ripped the jewels off the star, and left her, sprawled across the bed in a drunken semistupor.

Eight grand Garrow had received from the fence. Four apiece, Madigan had thought.

Garrow looked at his hands. They had saved him four thousand dollars and he was obscurely grateful to them. So now he had eight grand. It was no big deal, but it was enough to keep him going for a while. He had no expensive tastes.

Chapter III

THINKING back, Bill Garrow went over the murder scene again. His necktie wouldn't give him away for there must have been tens of thousands of them made. He'd paid a buck for it in a store that sold nothing but ties, and where there were so many customers it would be impossible for a clerk

to remember one buyer.

The patrol wagon came to a halt and Garrow could see the dull green lights in front of the station house. He had been seen going into the hotel, of course, but that was covered by his having been at the tea pad. He hadn't been seen on the fourteenth floor by anyone as far as he could tell and, with any sort of luck, Madigan's body shouldn't be found till long after he was arrested. It would be pice and tidy to be in jail when the murder was discovered. He liked that, for he knew full well that, detective stories to the contrary, it's almost impossible for a medical examiner to tell from a corpse at what precise time death had occurred.

Following the burly policeman into the station house he looked about him. The other men and women followed him in single file, most of them looking uneasy. Garrow could imagine what it would be like for those of the men who were married to try and explain what they had been doing.

The desk sergeant looked down at them over the high rim of the stained mahogany in front of him. He grinned, then turned to the arresting officers and said, "Quite a little batch of beauties you got!"

The men were giving their names as John Doe and John Smith. Just as automatically the women gave their names as Jane Doe and Jane Smith. It was as cut and dried as a well-rehearsed scene in a play.

Garrow watched with some amusement. He was the only one who was benefiting from the whole thing. Leaning against the wall he wondered if all station houses all over the world looked the same and smelled the same. Every one he'd ever been in had smelled this way.

It was an odor made up of unwashed bodies, dead tobacco, and fear.

Ambling over to the desk sergeant, Garrow asked, "What's going to happen to us, Sarge?"

The red-faced, heavy-set man who could have stood the exercise of walking a beat, looked down at him and said, "You just an innocent bystander like these other slob?"

Nodding, Garrow grinned. "Even more innocent."

"A night in the tank, unless you wanna

see if you can get hold of a bail bond boy."

"And after that?"

"Umm," the red-faced man considered, "they generally call it disorderly conduct in court. Ten days or twenty-five dollars. That's about all." He pointed a stubby thumb at the girls, and Mac. "They're the ones who are in for trouble."

"Six months?" Garrow asked.

"Maybe more, depending on how the magistrate feels. Sometimes one of them gets real holy and throws the book at them."

Thanking him, Garrow retreated again to the wall, to watch what was going on. He wondered if maybe he should take the ten days instead of paying the fine. The island would be a good place to wait while the heat over Madigan's death died down.

Look at it from any angle, he thought, and he was in the clear. There was just nothing that the cops could fasten onto that would get him in trouble. Smiling, he congratulated himself.

It was just before twelve o'clock and the police were negligent. There was nothing to be feared from a group like this. As soon as all of them had been booked and thrown in the tank these prisoners could be forgotten.

Garrow watched Mac, the man who had put on the tea party. His face was turning black and blue and the swelling was bigger now. That had been quite a clout he received from the cop, Garrow thought.

Mac must be real mad, he decided. To pay off for protection and then not get it, must be annoying.

LOUELLA, one of the girls Garrow knew, walked to his side and said, "Can you go bail for me, honey?"

He asked, "Why?"

"My kid." She looked shaken. "God knows what the baby sitter will do now. I swore I'd be home an hour ago."

No one was paying any attention to them. He dilated his nostrils and said, "You've been a bad girl, haven't you, honey?"

She snapped, "Oh, cut that out, willya?"

He leaned closer and gripped the soft flesh of her arms. Maybe, he thought, it would be worth while to spring both of them and go home with her. He had a little fun

coming to him after what he had been through.

She said, "Garrow, have a heart, willya? Spring me. I'm broke and need dough bad."

Her compact body was close to his. He walked towards the desk, estimating how much it would cost him. He was riding high. He'd got away with murder. He was in the chips, and he felt great.

Then, right then, through the doorway of the station house came two uniformed policemen. They were having a hard time with their prisoner. She was drunk, noisy, and nasty.

A mink stole dragged on the dirty floor of the station house as the cops muscled her into the room. Her strapless gown had given up the struggle to do any covering at all. Her breasts which had carried her from a tenement in Brooklyn to fame in Hollywood were bare.

She said, "You can't do this to me! You know who I am?"

A cop said, "Yeah, sister, we know who you are. Now shut up and try to act like a lady, or is that too hard?"

Her long-nailed fingers ripped out and cut the edge of the policeman's eye. He swore and the other cop managed to grab her wrists before she could do any more damage.

"You can't throw me in a drunk tank! I'm too important!" She threw her head back and her long red hair whipped through the air in the gesture that celluloid had made immortal.

The desk sergeant groaned. "Not that one again! Movie stars! Bah! They save it all up on the Coast and then they come to New York and they get rid of it all in one big lump!" He shook his head and asked the arresting officers, "Why didn't you take her home? You know her press agent'll be down here in half an hour with fifteen lawyers!"

"We hadda bring her in," one of the officers said. "She made such a mess in the night club that the manager swore that this time he'd prefer charges!"

"Yeah, yeah, until the lawyers get around to him and buy him off. All right, let's book her and get it over with."

The Hollywood star drew herself up with drunken arrogance, shook off the restrain-

ing hands of the two policemen and said, "G'wan, take a good look!" Then in a fumble fingered fashion she managed to pull up the bodice of her gown till she was almost respectable.

Throwing the longer end of her stole about her bare shoulders, she waggled her head from side to side in a weak attempt at an imitation of sobriety and said, "What a bunch of punks!" She looked drunkenly into each face of the men who had been arrested in the raid and said to each one in turn, "I wouldn't date you, ya bum!"

And then she came to the end of the line and her reddened eyes were focussed on Garrow. A limp forefinger pointed straight at him and she said, "I know you!" Pushing her celebrated face even closer to his she said, "I know you!" Outrage was plain on her face. "You—" Her brows drew together at the painful process of thought.

"There was another guy," she said slowly.

OF ALL the lousy breaks! The one person in all the world who could connect

him with Madigan. He could see what had to follow. Her identification of him and Madigan as the jewel thieves, then the connection between him and the dead man would no longer be tenuous. The cops would not accept Madigan's death as suicide.

And then Garrow felt as if something had let go in his brain. There was an almost audible click, as if a too tightly wound spring had let go.

Behind him the open door of the station house gaped. Beyond it was the darkness of the street. All Garrow could think of was escape.

At first the police had been amused at the movie star's recognition of one of her fellow prisoners. But when Garrow, with no warning, suddenly spun around and raced for the door, the girl screamed like a fishwife:

"Don't let him go! He stole my rubies! Catch him!"

She was no longer as drunk as she had been.

[Turn page]

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Chapter IV

That was the last Bill Garrow heard as his pelting feet carried him out of the station house. One leap carried him down the five steps and the soles of his feet stung as he landed and continued without a break to run with all his strength.

Ahead of him the sidewalk was solid with uniformed policemen. His brain reeled. It was too complete a nightmare to be real. He spun around. That direction was blocked by the bulky bodies of an equal number of cops!

Even as he spurted across the street his stunned mind told him why the cops were there. It was midnight. They were changing shifts. The men who had worked from four to twelve were going off duty and the men who had the twelve to eight grind were coming on.

To the rear of him a cop yelled through the door of the station house:

"Stop him!"

By then he was across the street.

Crouching behind a parked car he tried to make up his mind what to do. It was hard with the street blocked by blue uniforms but he would not, absolutely could not, give up this easily.

Ahead of him was a railing that kept people from falling into an areaway in front of an old brownstone house. He vaulted over it and down into the pitch darkness.

Just in time, too, for a bullet hit the iron railing and screeched as it ricocheted away. He had landed before he heard the shot.

Pain screamed up his leg to his brain from his ankle. He'd landed with one foot in a garbage pail the other on the uneven ground of the areaway. Clenching his fists till his nails cut into his palms he looked about wildly.

Above him he could hear the sound of pounding feet racing toward him and the *cul de sac* into which he had dropped. To his right there was an ornamental ironwork door, a remnant of time when this house had been respectable. Throwing his shoulder against it, he prayed for it to open. People, he thought, who live across the street from a police station shouldn't have to worry about burglars.

It gave and he tumbled on one leg through the iron-scrrolled door.

INSIDE, the rancid smell of cats and garbage hit Garrow's nostrils. A flashlight was turned downwards from the street into the areaway he had just quitted.

He was in a section about four feet square. He had to stoop, for above his head was the underside of the stairway.

In front of him was another door. A wooden one. Scratching a match he looked at the lock. Then he dropped the match and, still standing one-legged, he ripped his wallet out of his pocket and tore the celluloid square out of the wallet.

Pushing it in between the door and the frame he wriggled it experimentally. Then pushing against the door he turned the knob as hard as he could. The door opened as he heard behind him the sound of the police running down the wooden stairs that led to the areaway.

Slamming the door behind him, he dropped the celluloid and leaned against the wall for a moment, biting his lips at the torture of his ankle. Experimentally he put part of his weight on it. He couldn't decide whether it was broken or just badly sprained.

Hopping through complete darkness on one leg was dangerous, he found. He kept bumping into furniture in the long hall through which he was making his way.

Perhaps ten feet ahead of him was a dim glow of light which must be coming in through a rear door or window. With all the noise he was making he was sure no one could be in the house, but he was wrong, for as he staggered to a dirty-paned window through which some random light was pouring, he heard a little shred of sound, then the overhead, unshaded bulb went on.

Simultaneously he heard the police yelling, and pounding on the front door.

The little wispy old man who was revealed by the raw light was more frightened than he was, Garrow saw.

"Wh—" the old man gasped as he held the front of an old fashioned night-shirt closed with a shaking hand.

"Shaddup!" Garrow was ferocious. "What does this window lead to?"

"A back yard." The voice trembled off into silence.

Slamming the window open, Garrow said to the old man, "C'mere."

Shaking in every limb, the man obeyed.

Garrow pushed the old man out the window ahead of him.

Some inner surge of resentment made itself verbal and the old man said, "I'm in my bare feet, I'll catch my death of cold!"

As he went through the window, his bent back even further humped by the exertion, Garrow leaned over him and sliced at the thin neck with the edge of a deadly hand.

The old man didn't even grunt. His slack body hung half in and half out of the window. With no hesitation, Garrow tumbled the unconscious man out the window and followed as swiftly as his hurt ankle would let him.

He heard the front door crash open under the shoulders of the police.

The darkness of the yard was not complete. A slit of moon sent pale light over parts of the area. Other parts were in blackest shadow. So little time, Garrow thought almost despairingly. So little time.

Bundling the slight weight of the old man into his arms he hobbled towards some trash that was piled high in a rusting garbage can nearby, next to a fence that was on its last legs. Boards were missing from it and those that remained were rotten and soft.

Garrow arranged the old man behind the garbage can so that most of his body was hidden. Then lifting one frail arm he pushed it out into a little cold patch of moonlight.

If only he had Madigan's gun, he thought, he could prop it up in the old man's hand and leave him, as a decoy for the police. But he could waste no more time. The sound of the pursuers was loud in his ears.

With as much effort as he had ever expended in all his life he managed to squeeze through a space in the wooden fence. Then, his eye to a knothole, he waited.

The police streamed out into the yard, flashlights in hand.

THE uniformed man in the lead had a gun and when the searching lights spotted the hand the cop said, "There he is!"

Garrow called through the fence, "Yeah, you got me, but I'm gonna take a couple of you with me!"

If they fell for his bluff it might cover him for some desperately needed time.

He waited, heart in his mouth, until he saw the police draw back uncertainly. If he had been behind the garbage can with a gun, he could have picked them off like clay pigeons.

Once he saw the police had realized their danger," he backed away from the knothole as best he could on one leg.

They'd have the whole block staked out by now, he knew. What was there for him to do? Where to go? How to hide?

If only he hadn't injured his ankle, he'd have given them a run for their money. But now— His eyes swept around the yard into which he had gone. It was a replica of the one he had just left.

Stumbling, hopping, grunting, he made his way across the yard and through the fence on the far side. The cops would not be halted by his dummy defender much longer.

At the far side of the fence he paused and looked about. The house that abutted on the yard was in a better state of repair than the ones he had just passed through. A fire-escape ran up an outside wall.

It took his last bit of strength to make his way to an iron ladder, climb on a box, and then, hanging by his arms from the end of the ladder, muscle his way up to it. He clung there for a long moment gasping as though his lungs were on fire. Then, using just his good leg and his hands, he made his way up the ladder to the first floor fire-escape.

From his vantage point he could look across the two fences and into the yard where the police were now splayed out fanwise, and were closing in on the garbage can behind which the old man was lying.

It would be only a matter of seconds before they found out how they had been hoaxed. He lifted the window that faced the iron lattice work of the fire-escape. It was locked.

Bunching up his coat around his fist he drove it through the window, timing the crash with the roar of rage that came up

from the policemen as they discovered the unconscious old man.

Inside the room a quavering voice called, "Don't come in! Help! Police!"

A brunette girl, twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, a faded robe clutched to her breast, screamed in fright as she saw him hobble through the broken glass of the window and ease himself onto the floor.

"One more peep out of you, sister, and I'll slit your throat."

She fainted and slid to the floor, her robe opening. Looking at her nakedness dispassionately, he thought, some other time, honey. But that was sheer bravado.

Hobbling around her he made for the door.

In the hallway a dim yellow bulb cast long shadows along the carpeting. Dragging one leg behind him, his arms supporting most of his weight, he pulled himself along the wooden banister next to the stairwell.

Getting downstairs was almost more than he could manage, but by half sliding on the banister, and hopping on his good leg, he managed to make it to the ground floor. Behind him, he could see some baby carriages stored for the night under the stairway.

His ankle hurt too much. Falling on all fours, he clumsily pulled himself along on his hands and knees. The pain was now almost all he could feel or think about.

BLACKNESS was pushing against his eyeballs. But he got to the side of the nearest baby carriage and drew a packet of

matches from his pocket. First he lit a cigarette and, dragging the smoke down into his lungs, felt some of the blackness fade.

Then, using the lit match, he set fire to all the other matches in the packet. When they flared up brightly, he dropped the whole flaming thing into the baby carriage. It smouldered for awhile, and then burst into flames. Kneeling, he watched as the flames licked upward, higher and higher, then caught on the underneath part of the stairs. The old wood caught as though it had been drenched in gasoline.

Satisfied, he made his way on all fours towards the front door. The flames in the back of the hall were following him now. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination or if the fire was moving faster than he was and was catching up with him. That would be too ironical, he decided, to die in a fire of one's own setting. Drawing on some last unthought-of reservoir of strength, he managed to get to his feet.

Tucking his bad leg under him, he tried to hold it there with his hand and hop for the front door. It was tough, tougher than anything he had ever done in his life, but he made it.

Forcing the door open, he screamed, "Fire!"

He was on the street below the station house. The yards had led him there. He'd not even been conscious of going downtown. Above him in the house he'd set ablaze he heard frightened voices, the tumult of people

THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



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IT PACKS RIGHT



CUT TO PACK
SO JOYS INCREASE

stirring in fright at man's most ancient fear.

A middle-aged couple ran down the stairs, their arms around each other protectingly, the fire searing them so that they had to leap the last four steps.

They surged in mad panic for the front door, and Garrow said, "Please, I'm crippled! Please help me!"

They were decent enough so that the plea penetrated even their fear. The man shook his head, his iron-gray hair frizzed from the fire, and said to his wife, "You go ahead my dear. There's the street and safety. I'll help this poor man."

"Don't be silly, dear. I'll help, too."

With the man on his bad side, and the woman on the other, Garrow managed to get out the door, down the stoop and onto the street. In the distance he could hear the barking sound of the fire engines' horns. Behind him the old house was roaring.

People were pouring out of the house now. Garrow thought idly of the girl who had fainted in the back of the house, the one he had scared. She'd look like a piece of old toast in a couple of minutes.

Then the fire engine sped into the street and he asked, "I wonder, could you help me into that taxi across the street? I know it's a nuisance, but I'm just a visitor here, and this excitement is bad for me."

The man said, "No trouble at all." He helped Garrow into the taxi and returned to his wife as Garrow mumbled his thanks.

The street was thick with firemen and

policemen, but none of them were concerned with the taxi that was edging its way out of the street. If anything, the firemen were glad to see it go, for cars are the bane of all big city firemen, getting in the way, parking too near fire hydrants, being a general nuisance.

The cabbie asked, "Where you wanna go, mister?"

That was the big one all right—where to go? All he had on him was about ninety bucks. He had to get to the place he'd hidden the eight grand. With that in his hands he could see a doctor he knew who was not precisely a doctor, but whose lack of curiosity made up for the fact that he had lost his license.

When he'd hidden the money in his hotel room he'd never expected to have to grab it when he was on the lam. The cabbie twisted around and asked his question again.

Bill Garrow said, "Forty-seventh Street between Sixth and Seventh."

Chapter V

NOW the biggest danger was that his hotel was just across the street from the Elite where he hoped Madigan's corpse was still hanging. But what if the body had been found? That would mean more police.

Garrow had to take the risk.

The cab had to go east to Sixth Avenue, for Forty-seventh Street is one-way east to

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



MAKES EVERY PIPE
A PIPE OF PEACE!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.



*It costs
no more
to get
the best!*

west. Cutting through traffic, it drove through the street. Garrow sat back in the cab, his teeth almost meeting through his bottom lip. The jouncing the cab was giving him was not doing his ankle much good.

The car went through the street past the shop that sold antique coins and the one that sold special shoes for dancers, and passed the shop that sold canes and umbrellas. It passed the bars where the young chicks hang out with sailors and soldiers, and the one bar where you could always be sure of being able to put down a dime on a number, a fiver on a horse, or find a contact for anything from marijuana to the white stuff.

And then it stopped in front of his hotel.

Hoping that he was hidden in the darkness of the cab, Garrow looked all around. So far there was no sign of police activity around the Elite. Garrow could see no menace there. Paying the cabbie he painfully made his way out of the cab. The lobby of his hotel was as empty as it ever got which meant that there were only about eight people sitting and standing, reading tip sheets, or talking idly or passing the time of day.

The one hellhop that his hotel boasted saw him hobbling in through the front door and hurried to his side. The bellhop said, "Hi, Mr. Garrow. Need help?"

Unable to speak, Garrow just nodded, and put his arm around the uniformed man's shoulders. Even though no one turned to look, Garrow knew that everyone in the lobby, from the loungers to the night manager was conscious of him.

In the elevator the bellhop asked, "What happened?"

"Car," Garrow managed to get out. "Clipped me as it came around a corner."

"Lousy luck." The bellhop went into the usual New Yorker's tirade about how bad traffic is in town and how little the police seem to do about it.

But Garrow wasn't listening. He had one objective and only one. To get his money. To do that he had to stay conscious. All else was washed away in a sea of pain.

The bellhop helped him to his room and left, his palm green from the bill that Garrow had placed there.

It took all Garrow's courage to keep himself from throwing himself on his bed and passing out. Hobbling to the bathroom, he emptied a half full bottle of codeine down his throat and then, using a chair as a crutch he got to the night table at the side of his bed.

He was afraid to sit down on the edge of the bed even for a moment. Instead he bent over and pulled the Gideon Bible that all hotels have in every room out from the lower level of the night table. He knocked a flock of magazines and empty cigarette packages onto the floor.

Then, clutching the Bible to his chest, he fumbled the phone off the hook. Giving the number he wanted to the hotel operator he waited numbly.

A voice asked, "Yes?"

"Doc," Garrow's voice was weak, "Garrow. Come right over."

"Where and what should I bring?"

Garrow tried to laugh but it wasn't much of a success. "My hotel, and it's not a bullet wound. I just hurt my ankle. Hurry will ya, Doc?"

Hanging up, he finally worked up enough courage to look at his ankle. Sitting in the chair next to the bed he eased his trouser leg up and pushed his sock down. It was worse than he had thought it would be, although the pain should have told him. A half-inch of white bone showed through his puffed skin.

SO IT was broken. He tried to be philosophical about it. Doc could straighten it out, put it in a cast, give him something to ease the pain and then, out of New York but fast. He knew just the spot. And it wasn't far. He'd used it to cool off in before. Staten Island. A mere ferry ride away, and yet for all the connection the fifth borough had with New York proper, he thought, you might as well be in Kokomo.

Consciousness was sliding away and he shook his head to try to keep awake. The Bible had almost slid out of his fingers. Better, he thought, take out some loot and have it ready for Doc. No sense in letting that vulture see how much money he had.

Taking a cover of the Bible in each hand,

he ripped. The bills dropped out from the spine of the binding where he had secreted them. The torn Bible fell from his hands as he grabbed at the money.

Stacking it neatly, he tried to make himself feel good. Eight grand. It wasn't bad, at that. Say a C-note to the doc, and the rest for him.

Forcing himself erect he divided the big packet of money into smaller packets and was preparing to distribute them into smaller packets and put them in each of his pockets so no bulge would show, when there was a tapping at his door.

"Doc!" he called, then added, "Come on in. The door's unlocked."

It was, too.

That was why the detective kicked it open with one foot, and threw himself to one side, just in case Garrow had a gun and was ready to use it.

Garrow stood, his back to his window, his one hand clenched around the back of



It was a long drop.
Fifteen stories.

the chair that was supporting him, the other filled with the bills for which he had stolen and killed.

There were hundreds in that packet, fifties, twenties, and a lot of tens and fives.

Eyes blurring, Garrow wondered for a moment if it was the amount of codeine he had taken, or if the pain was trying to make him pass out.

There was no reality to the plainclothesman who faced him, in one hand a gun so big that it made the Police Positive. 38 look almost like a toy.

"Wh' you want?" Garrow asked, and the room was spinning around and around.

"You, Garrow."

"Wha' for?"

"Lots of things, kiddo, lots of things. Some little, some big." The detective's harsh face was bleak, but Garrow couldn't see it very well. "Little things like jewel stealing, and big things like arson and murder. We got lots of things to talk to you about, Garrow."

"Ya' can't prove it."

Garrow tried to make it sound positive but he wasn't very successful. That was the one real tenet of his existence. Nothing was real or true unless it could be proved against him.

The detective was slowly coming closer. He said, "Don't make book on that, Garrow. We got you cold. The gal from Hollywood identified you and Madigan."

So they'd had time to find out about Madigan. That made it real tough. Eight grand wouldn't buy him a very good mouthpiece.

Garrow said, "Who's Madigan?"

"Just a guy you strangled across the street."

It was just a guess, Garrow knew. The cops must have figured that if he and Madigan had been in on the robbery together then he, Garrow was the most likely murder suspect. They had doped it correctly, but proving it was something else.

The detective washed that solace away when he said, "If we don't get you for Madigan, Garrow, we got you dead to rights for a girl who died in the fire you set. We got enough witnesses. More than enough."

THE old man he'd slugged, and the middle-aged couple who'd helped him out of the burning house.

"But," the detective said, and he was only four feet away from Garrow now, "I ain't got all night to spend barberin'. Let's go. Gimme the dough. That'll help to fry you, but good."

His head down on his chest like an old, old man, Garrow looked at the money in his hand. It wasn't fair. He'd worked too hard for that money. He wasn't going to give it up. And he wasn't going to go to jail and stand trial and get electrocuted. Not him. Not Garrow.

Without a warning of any kind, he threw himself backwards.

It surprised the detective who stood flat-footed for just a second, then leaped for the window. But he was too late. Garrow's feet flicked past him.

It was a long drop.

Fifteen stories.

Long before Garrow hit the marquee out in front of his hotel down on the second story, he had released his grip on the money. It fluttered down through the night air.

It was still alive with motion, flickering and scooting off in unpredictable directions long after Garrow hit the marquee, bounced on it, then rolled off and landed with a dull thump across the motor of a cab.

The cabbie jumped when he saw what was coming, just before Garrow's body landed. Then he swore at the corpse. It had dented the front of his car.

The cabbie said, "Damn leapers, they never think of anybody else!"

Then he saw the green stuff raining down all around him and, greedy hands out-

stretched, he began to collect the bills that were nearest him.

A vagrant puff of wind drove some of the bills down Forty-seventh Street and out across Broadway. Some of them landed on the pigeons that sleep on Father Duffy's statue. The birds complained as the bills woke them, but soon went back to sleep.

The last fifty-dollar bill wasn't found till almost two months later. By that time Madigan's and Garrow's bodies, unclaimed by anyone, had missed burial in Potter's field because a certain proportion of the unwanted dead in New York are turned over to medical schools where they are used for dissection by internes.

Separated only by the width of the wall of the metal tanks they floated in, their cadavers were beginning to turn brown from formaldehyde. When that happened, it was as if he had never lived, except as a statistic in the crime files that yearly, the New York Police Department turns over to the F.B.I. But you could never have found Garrow in the midst of all those ciphers. ● ● ●



ooo

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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"Digging for bait, Fat?" asked Frost

SET A THIEF—

By ROBERT CARLTON

*For fifty grand, he'd not only
play both ends of that necklace
against the middle—he'd put
his own vulnerable neck in it!*

SO YOU DON'T know a thing about Merkel's murder, huh?"

Lou Frost decided he didn't like Lieutenant Garson's tone. The question had a nasty sarcastic quality suggestive of Room 3 at the Homicide Bureau—a bare, windowless room, furnished with a single oak chair and a bright light. Lou had occupied the chair on several

memorable occasions, and had no panting desire to sit there again. He lowered his newspaper and peered owlishly at his unwelcome breakfast guest.

"Naturally not." He hoped his voice held the right shade of injured innocence. "Merkel and I were pals. He gave me his best bet and I gave him mine. Only yesterday we went over the racing form together, to see if we could pick a long shot."

"He used you, too." Like all Swedes, Garson was stubborn. His pink complexion, blond hair and blue eyes suggested mildness, gentleness; but Lou Frost knew the big dick could change instantly into a towering Viking with iron-hard fists and black fury. It was a metamorphosis that made Lou's ribs ache to think about. "You acted as his runner getting bail bond papers signed and springing guys from jail. Yesterday afternoon you got Fat Ballard out."

Lou Frost glanced out of the cafe window at City Hall's towering white obelisk pointed at the clear California sky. It was almost court time, nearly nine, by the gold watch on his slim wrist. Many of the pedestrians hurrying up Broadway carried brief cases—attorneys, he supposed, on the way to the Hall of Justice. Lou sighed, laid his paper down. He sometimes wished he were an attorney and more conventional.

"I do many jobs around Civic Center," he informed Garson, "none of them illegal. I get information for lawyers—mostly defense lawyers, since the D.A. has a police force available. I sell inside stories to the papers. I act some as unofficial advisor to—ah—persons in distress. I occasionally worked as a jail runner for Merkel. So what?"

"So you'd do anything for a fast buck," Garson said.

THE LEATHER booth seat suddenly felt uncomfortable. Lou shifted his position, and the front of his expensive gray suit coat fell open, revealing a snowy expanse of tailored broadcloth shirt and a necktie of hand-painted desert vistas.

"Not anything," he corrected. "Let's say anything legal. And I have my code of ethics, Garson, don't forget. Just like those attorneys going to court. I never violate a

confidence, never let a client down. I have my charities, too. The Boys' Club at Santa Monica. The Salvation Army and—"

"Cut the speech-making," Garson ordered. "What about Merkel?"

Lou removed the sunglasses from his thin nose and polished the lenses thoughtfully. His ubiquitous brown eyes looked everywhere but at the cop. He brushed dark hair back from a forehead tanned from many hours at his favorite beach. He considered himself not unhandsome, despite his thirty-five years.

"Very distressing about Merkel," he said. "He was a ruthless person, but entertaining at times."

A small silence fell between the two men. Garson glowered as Lou leaned over the newspaper, regarded the item he'd been reading.

"I see Claire Vinson's pearls were stolen again night before last," he said blandly. "That's the third time in two years. Odd about that necklace. It's worth fifty thousand. The two times before the insurance company paid a five thousand reward for its return. Vinson hasn't had a contract in pictures for nearly three years."

"That has nothing to do with Merkel," Garson said.

"Are all Swedes so bug-headed?" Frost asked. "What's your proposition, Garson?"

The homicide man leaned forward, his blue eyes shiny—and hard. "Undercover man on this case. There's some information we police can't get. You might uncover a couple of useful things."

Lou Frost sipped his coffee, found it cold. "Undercover man—that's a high-class term for stool pigeon, when you use it. You know I have contacts. What makes you think Merkel's killer came from the underworld?—this could be a first crime."

"Merkel dealt with the underworld as a bail-bond broker."

"Very elementary," Lou said dryly. "What does this job pay?"

"Ten dollars a day and your expenses. What do you say?"

Lou Frost folded the newspaper, yawned.

"It's better than sitting on my hands," he said.

LOU FROST taxied out to the Vinson place in Brentwood. He didn't feel energetic enough to drive his car so early in the morning, and anyway Los Angeles County was footing the bill. It was a Monterey-style ranch house, shaded by tall eucalyptus trees. Lou caught the blue glint of a swimming pool across the back lawn. A uniformed maid answered the door. Lou handed her a gold-engraved card, pushed into the foyer.

"Tell Miss Vinson I'm waiting in the bar," he said, "wherever that is."

The maid closed the door, looked at him coldly. "Miss Vinson is in the living room with Mr. Meer. I'll announce you."

Lou handed her his hat. "Never mind. I'll go right in."

He walked precisely but confidently under an archway into the living room. It was a lovely room, he noted, charmingly informal. Open, floor-length windows led to a brick enclosed patio that brimmed with flowers. Navajo rugs hung from the walls and the fireplace was a graceful poem in stone. A man rose from a low divan near the windows as Frost entered. He was tall, not young, and wore a neatly trimmed mustache. His sport shirt was open at the throat, and he looked surprised, as if he hadn't expected visitors.

"Sit down, it's just me," Lou said cheerfully. "I take it you're Clyde Meer. I've seen you in a picture or two. Not very good parts, but then you're not a very good actor. Good morning."

The woman rose, too. She was still lovely despite the fattiness at her chin, the vague paunchiness under her eyes. A tight-fitting housecoat hugged her luxurious figure. Frost eyed her speculatively. Claire Vinson had been big time—once.

"Good morning," she said thinly. "I like your nerve."

"I like it myself at times," Lou smiled. "Nerve carries you into situations that might otherwise prove dull and uninteresting. I'm Lou Frost."

"That's nice," she said acidly. "Are you an insurance salesman, or the Fuller Brush man?"

"Neither." Frost's smile broadened. "I'm what you might call a pearl-fisherman."

Her eyes shifted quickly to Meer. The tall actor's mouth tightened and he closed his bony hands into fists. Frost watched him carefully. The man was muscular, had threatening possibilities.

"If you're referring to Miss Vinson's necklace," Meer said, "you'll have to talk to the insurance company. We haven't anything to do with the matter."

"I have talked to them." Frost helped himself to a cigarette from a lacquered box on a table. "Not over a half-hour ago. There won't be any reward this time, Mr. Meer. The insurance people intend to catch the thief, if there was a thief, and recover the necklace themselves. A very sad state of affairs, I'd say."

Meer's face darkened. "I don't like your implication, Mr. Frost."

Frost blew smoke at the low-beamed ceiling. "There are implications and implications, Mr. Meer. The point is, implications buy us no cakes. A pearl necklace worth fifty grand can be hard to find. Rather than pay the full amount of the policy the insurance company might be persuaded to change their minds. Of course—" he added meditatively—"there is the ethical angle to consider. We wouldn't want any complications."

Meer started forward, but Claire Vinson caught his arm. Her face was a study in dramatic thought. Fear, avarice and something resembling animal cunning played over her mobile features. And she wasn't acting, Frost saw. She sank down on the divan, motioned to a place beside her. Her smile was the bright, polished glamour of the past.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Frost?" she asked. "I'll ring the maid for coffee. It's so nice you called."

FROST BIDED his time under the palm. The sun had gone down, but a trace of light was left in the western sky—a faint pink flush that tailed the day. Fat Ballard wouldn't show before full darkness. Fat was too smart, too sly. He might even come in disguise, Frost thought absently, driving a Good Humor Ice Cream truck or wearing a street-cleaner's costume. Fat wasn't above helpful props. He was a thief's thief—and there was plenty at stake.

Frost glanced at his watch, thought about Garson. The big Swede had nerve, too—hiring him as a stool pigeon. Lou disliked the brand, but he liked being honest with himself. In Garson's mind he was a stooly, and cops while using stoolies, didn't respect the species. Garson was due for some surprises, and to keep him honest, Lou meant to present a bill for ten dollars and expenses.

If he figured right, it was in this block. The police blotter showed the time and place of Fat's arrest. Frost kicked the ground impatiently. He hated waiting, but sometimes it was necessary.

Fat came as himself. Lou watched the cab stop at the corner to disgorge the stout man in tweeds. Fat wore a felt hat, brim pulled low over his eyes. He didn't look like a thief. He looked like a tired business man arriving home from the office. He glanced casually around as he sauntered down the sidewalk. There were no pedestrians about, and Frost was behind the palm. Fat dropped to his knees on the edge of somebody's lawn and began digging in a flower bed.

Frost came up behind him quietly. "Digging for bait, Fat? You must be a fisherman, too."

Fat didn't jump more than three feet. He spun around, holding a handful of soil. His florid face went pasty.

"Keep digging," Lou ordered. "No need for both of us to get our hands dirty."

Fat dropped the soil, reached for his hip. Frost half-closed his eyes. "Better not," he warned. "Merkel's dead and can't front for you. Besides, murderers are not admitted to bail."

Fat's hand came up empty. He got to his feet. Recognition showed in his pale eyes, and suspicion. He gave no indication he'd heard Frost's comments.

"I didn't know it was you," he said sullenly. "What do you want? How come you're following me?"

"I'm not following you, Fat. You were arrested in this block night before last, and it's only two streets away from the Vinson place. I like putting things together, such as broken vases. Too bad the prowl car sneezed you when it did, but those accidents happen to the best thieves. And you had time to hide

the loot, so let's be cheerful about it. I got you out of jail yesterday morning, didn't I?"

"Sure." Fat's flaccid lips trembled. "I'm real grateful to you and Mr. Merkel. I paid Mr. Merkel his bonding fee this morning, soon as I got the dough. I—"

"Like hell you did," Frost said pleasantly. "Mr. Merkel died at ten o'clock last night—violently."

Fat's mouth hung open. "Died?"

"Let's be honest, open and aboveboard, Fat, no matter how it hurts. You know Merkel is dead. Now get down and dig."

Fat's lips clamped shut. "Go to hell."

"I'm giving you a chance." An edge crept into Frost's voice. "The cops think Merkel's killer was a gunsel. If they tie you up with the Vinson necklace, they'll know Merkel was a front. Twice the insurance company paid money over to Merkel for the necklace's return. The cops will figure a cross somewhere down the line and you'll be a candidate for the gas chamber."

"I never killed him," Fat said. "I'm clean."

"Clean—! You're in this switch up to your neck. You weren't the killer—you haven't the guts for murder. I don't pin phoney raps on anybody and you didn't exactly steal the bauble. If you're smart, you might get off with six months for bunco. Now, get down and dig!"

Fat's hand moved toward his hip again. Frost eyed him coldly. "Go ahead," he said. "Your toy pistol doesn't scare me to death. You've got everything to lose."

"It's not a toy pistol," Fat whined. "It's a thirty-eight automatic."

"Interesting," Frost said dryly. "Merkel was killed by a thirty-eight bullet."

Fat sagged to his knees and dug.

LOU FROST brushed the dirt off the pearls and dropped them into his coat pocket. He hummed a tune as he walked toward Hillcrest Drive and the Vinson place. So far, the broken vase fit nicely. All that remained was—his steps slowed as he saw the police car parked a half-block from the Monterey house. Detective Lieutenant Garson crooked his finger as Lou hove alongside.

Lou minced over to the car, thinking how

hot and heavy the pearls suddenly felt. Garson chewed his cigar, scanned Lou through slitted eyes.

"I was wondering about you," the detective said. "I have it from a cab driver you paid Miss Vinson a call this morning. You're supposed to be working on the Merkel case."

"A man can have more than one iron in the fire," Lou said indignantly. "Your ten dollars a day doesn't buy me body and soul."

"Let's get this clear," Garson said. "I don't want any shenanigans, understand?"

Lou thought about Room 3 and the bright, bright light. His ribs ached. "I understand, Lieutenant. I understand perfectly."

Garson unhooked the door, climbed out. His six-feet-two hulked over Lou's slender figure. Lou felt his throat tighten and the cool evening grew abruptly hot. Garson tossed his cigar away.

"Maybe I'd better look you over," he said, "and be sure you're right. I don't trust you, Frost. I think you'd sell your own brother up the river for a dime."

"I don't have a brother," Lou said hastily. "Would a cousin do?"

He couldn't stand a frisk. He shuddered to think what would happen to his beach tan if the big dick slipped a hand into his coat pocket. He edged away, keeping distance from disaster.

"You got me wrong," Lou talked fast. "I'm not a stooly, Lieutenant. Let's say I'm an opportunist. I see the possibilities in a situation and explore them. That isn't unethical or even unusual. I resent your attitude, treating me like a Fifth Street tipster. A man of your intelligence should be able to detect a gentleman. I'm an honest man, Lieutenant, def—"

"Always speech-making," Garson growled, advancing. "Quit hopping around. I want to search you."

Lou sidestepped, avoiding the detective's big hands. "You're not being fair. Remember in this case, I'm your co-worker. I'm a cop, too. Cops don't search each other. They have a high professional standard, based in mutual confidence and respect. Have I asked to search you? Have I—"

Lou stopped talking as he saw the blue flames begin to burn in Garson's eyes—the

Viking light, the fierce wild prelude to Room 3. Lou's mouth dried and his spirits wilted and he wanted a long cold drink, mostly bourbon. Garson hunched his broad shoulders, reached.

"You're guilty as hell of something," he gritted. "You've pulled a fast one. Come here!"

Lou jumped back. "No, Garson, no—"

"This is a pinch!" Garson roared. "You're under arrest."

He lunged forward, but his arms circled empty air. Lou was running down the block. It seemed the best idea. He couldn't cope with Garson's two hundred and twenty pounds. It would be like embracing a grizzly bear. He ran away from the Vinson house, backtracked down the sidewalk. He heard Garson shout behind him, then *crack*—a sharp report shattered Brentwood's peaceful quiet. Something vicious clipped the palm fronds overhead, zinged away.

Lou ducked across a dark lawn, his flying feet digging wet turf. He had no clear idea where he was going, except away from there. He heard the police car's motor roar into life. Tires screeched across the pavement. He glanced over his shoulder, saw Garson swerve the car into a hard U-turn. The siren growled, rose to a full-voiced wail.

Lou climbed over a fence, found himself in a dog kennel. An Irish setter ran at him, barked and showed his teeth, adding to the general confusion. Lou got out of there, too. There was no alley, but he made the next street. Garson's headlights cut the corner as he fled across another lawn. He told himself he couldn't run farther, but the memory of Room 3 gave his legs lightness.

He found refuge in a gardener's shack. He crouched there, dimly aware he was surrounded by rakes, shovels, trowels, lawn-mowers and other implements of torture. He heard the police car growl through the streets and excited voices call over the lawns. Then after a long time, it was quiet. Lou risked a deep breath.

LOU FROST paused outside the brick patio wall and adjusted his hand-painted tie. He wished he were a trifle more presentable—the chase had done his clothes no good.

He thoughtfully eyed the glass doors leading to the Vinson living room and decided discretion was good sense. He dropped the necklace in a glazed yellow flower pot and stepped gingerly over the flagstones.

Claire Vinson rose from a deep chair as he entered the room. Her slinky gown of some crepelike stuff clung to her full curves, made Frost forget her throat's fattiness. He wondered, in a purely academic way, how she would respond to the oblique approach. Clyde Meer's steady stare wiped the thought from his mind. The actor's eyes were hostile. Back against the fireplace, he looked taller than his six feet.

"We have a front door," Claire said. "And you've kept us waiting. You're late."

"I detoured," Lou said, "by way of a dog kennel. Ordinarily I like dogs. I have a cocker spaniel myself, but this beast was definitely unfriendly. He—"

"Come to the point," Meer ordered. "Did you get it?"

"Let's not be over-eager," Lou said mildly. "Of course, I got it."

Claire held her hand out imperiously. Lou gave it an impersonal glance, as if inspecting the quality of her manicure.

"There are a few little details we should clear up," he said conversationally. "First, I like to get paid for my work."

"You'll get half the reward money. Give me my necklace."

"I thought I made it clear there won't be any reward money," Lou said softly.

Claire Vinson glanced at Meer. The tall actor walked across the room, lips tightening. "What are you trying to pull? I haven't liked your brass from the beginning. Hand over those pearls!"

Lou's brown eyes were very mild, very alert. "Let's see what we have here, Mr. Meer. We have two people who staged a fake robbery, in this case once too often. You didn't know Fat Ballard had been sneezed accidentally by the cops. You thought he'd delivered the necklace to Merkel, and when Merkel didn't come across, you figured you'd been rooked."

He saw Meer's hand slide toward his hip, saw the actor's face harden. He was no man to cross, a man with the guts for murder. It

was in Meer's tense mouth, in his narrow eyes—brightening like a lamp turned to full wick. Lou wondered if maybe he hadn't gone too far.

"You're out of pictures aren't you, Miss Vinson? But you're very attached to the necklace. It's a relic of past grandeur."

Her voice was shaky. "I don't want to part with my pearls, if that's what you mean."

"I thought so. It explained the fake robberies. Otherwise you would have sold the necklace as any honest person in bad circumstances would have done."

Meer edged forward. "Shut up, Claire. This is a trick."

"Sure, it's a trick," Lou said thinly. "I'm full of tricks, Meer, but murder isn't one of them."

Lou backed toward the door. Garson was parked down the street. Good old Garson, who never gave up. Brother officer. The gun flashed into Meer's hand, and Lou got rocks in his stomach.

"It won't do you any good," he said, but his voice lacked conviction. "It's too late, Meer, and I don't have the pearls."

"So you know about Merkel," Meer said gently. "I thought you talked like a con man."

THERE WAS something about sticking one's head in the lion's mouth, Lou decided, that he didn't like. He hated to set himself up like a target in a shooting gallery. He'd hoped to win out by finesse. He saw Claire Vinson fade toward the glass doors, knew if she closed them the shot wouldn't be heard outside the house. The time for finesse was past, Lou decided. He dived for the sheltering divan.

The shot blasted as he hit the floor behind the piece. The bullet thudded into the upholstery, and cotton batting drifted over him like chunky snow. Lou crawled deeper into the corner and reminded himself life was sweet. He heard the actor's feet scuffle the rug and looked for some place to go. There was no place to go.

His eye lit wildly on a poker standing against the fireplace at the divan's far end. A poker wasn't much protection against a

gun, but it was better than conversation. He crawled down the divan, wrapped his fingers around the poker and said a small and fervent prayer.

Meer's head appeared over the sofa's top. Meer, eyes dead, lips twisted. Lou rapped the head and it disappeared. He rose like a jack-in-the-box. Meer was holding his forehead and lifting the gun. Lou clouted him again, and Meer shot the gun into the rug. The actor turned as if going for a short walk. He took two steps and crumpled on the rug.

Lou leaped across the divan. He scooped the gun up as Claire Vinson ran toward the glass patio doors. She seemed to be in a hurry.

"No," Lou panted. "You have a front door, remember?"

Garson arrived without formalities. He barged into the living room, gun in hand. He surveyed the damage without comment, got his handcuffs out and started for Lou. Lou held his hand straight up like a Broadway traffic cop.

"Put the bracelets on our supine friend." He motioned to Meer's still figure. "He's not dead yet, but a session in Room 3 may cure that. He's the lad who killed Merkel."

"How do you know he killed Merkel?" Garson growled.

"Brother cop." Lou edged toward the patio doors. "If you'd read the morning paper, you'd be better informed. Merkel dealt with the underworld in more ways than one, and Meer risked his neck for a necklace and lost. You'll find a guy waiting in your office downtown. Name of Fat Ballard. He wants to make his soul shiny and confess his part in a bunco deal. Excuse me."

He darted out the door and ducked across the patio. Going over the wall, he scooped up the flower pot. Three blocks away he slowed down, straightened his tie. The insurance company had a standing reward for the apprehension of thieves and the discovery of fraudulent claims. A neat little sum, as he recalled it. And the police department owed him a poetic seventeen dollars and forty-three cents. ● ● ●



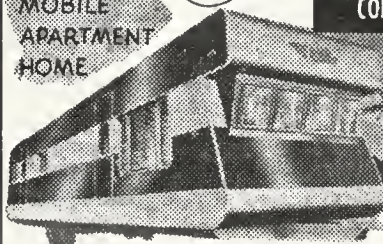
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It wasn't bad enough that Lita was dead. Now they wanted to wrap Fletcher up, too—in Lita's shroud



SUCH A PRETTY CORPSE

By FRANCIS HAMILTON

H E HADN'T meant to quarrel with her; it was a silly argument about the pink dress that made him slam out of the house in a temper. He had killed the evening at the pool hall and sitting alone through the worst half of a double bill. He was ready to tell her he was sorry.

If she didn't want to wear the dress any more—all right, it was her business.

But she had looked swell in it, black hair and smooth creamy skin against the little girl pink of the dress. Thinking about her made him cold and trembling.

Just married. The guys kidded him plenty about the night shifts he had to take. He didn't take that kind of kidding. "Just let anything happen—" He'd show them his doubled-up arm. "Just any mug lays a hand on her. I won't think twice about it. I'll kill him."

Fletcher wasn't fooling when he said that, either. Lita was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Whistling softly, he turned in at the big two-storey house. From farther up Arbolles Avenue he heard the shrieks of children at play, up long past bedtime. Soft noises of summer insects came from the trees. It was good to be alive.

The doors were open, the house warm and he groped for lights, calling, "Lita, hey Lita."

"You're not still sore at me, kid?"

He found the living room switch and lights went on but the house didn't come alive. "Lita," he called again.

The sound of his voice rang empty, the air lay heavy and dead, the curtains hung straight and lifeless. Down on Arbolles a thin voice shrilled, "One, two, three for Les-ter. One, two, three for Muh-ree."

He pushed into the kitchen, gazing vacantly around the white walls, not seeing it for a minute.

It.

A crumpled heap. A crazy jumble of arms and legs sticking out at grotesque angles. What had happened to it had been mostly at the back of the head, battered and crushed. A pile of flesh and bones and hair and a cotton house dress, huddled in the corner as if it had been fleeing, hoping for a place to hide from what had overtaken it. This wasn't a woman, it was only a thing, a mere object.

The kids down the block loosed more shrill voices. "One, two, three for Bertie—one, two, three—"

Fletcher let out a scream. "Lita!" He flung himself at the bundle. His cry turned out the neighborhood.

IT was midnight and he hadn't been out of the kitchen. They had taken away her body, a dirty brown blanket over it. A little knot of people still was out in front. Cigarettes gleamed in the dark as neighbors talked in low, faintly nervous voices about what had caused Hank Fletcher to go off his rocker and bash in the head of his bride of two months.

There were three of them, the police chief, a fat cop too big for his uniform and the D. A.'s man over from the county seat.

Over and over he told his story. About the argument over the dress he'd paid \$39.50 for and now she wouldn't wear. He swore at her and barged out of the house. Things hadn't been any better at the pool hall. Wid Small had looked up from the pinochle game and cracked, "The honeymoon is over. Two months married and Fletcher is back on the town."

His face had burned red and Small and the rest had guffawed. "Better get off them Saturday night shifts," somebody said. "That doll of yours needs plenty of attention."

Fletcher had come at them. "Anyone or all of you, out in back." He grabbed at Wid Small. Small reached a big arm up and caught Fletcher's wrist.

"Shut up, Fletch," he said soberly. "We were only kidding."

Fletcher jerked away, went outside. There was a big lineup at the movie next door but Pete Farley was at the ticket window. He was the manager, plump and blond, watching narrowly the dollar bills that were shoved at him. Lita had been an usherette there when Fletch married her and he had inherited a privilege. He gave Farley the high sign and Farley nodded, eyes screwed up and the faintest of smiles showing. Fletcher went around to the side door and slipped in; he could pay later without standing in line.

But halfway through the second feature he could stand it no longer. Something cut at his insides, keeping him squirming, driving him back to her. The air inside the movie pressed on him like a weight. He escaped from it, ran away, going back to Lita. He found her, dead.

That was all. They jerked and hammered the story out of him. All he wanted to do was die. But they would kill him in their own fashion. Drawing the words from him, monosyllables and broken phrases, twisting them to say what they wanted them to say.

He hated the D.A.'s man the most. "Sure you did. You killed her and then you went down there to the pool hall to kill Wid Small. Only you found he was too much for you."

Fletcher stared at him through reddened, blurring eyes.

"That's a lie. For God's sake, he's twice as big as me. Small is my pal—sure, we used to room together. My pal."

The D.A.'s man laughed. It sounded short and ugly.

"Sure, and the pal was bringing your wife home. You knew that didn't you? Those nights you were driving your route to Iron City?"

FLETCHER wrenched himself out of the chair and went for him, but the old chief caught him. "Sit down, kid. Don't make it any worse on yourself," he said. "Small says himself he brought her home last Saturday."

Fletcher clutched at his head. "There's an answer. Wid can explain."

"But he won't," the D.A.'s man said. He shook his head in sympathy. "I can't say I blame you, Fletcher. Go on, why don't you tell us? We'll give you a break, you can get a plea."

Dully, Fletcher argued. "Maybe Small came here after her. If what you say is true—"

They told him Small was in the clear. He hadn't been out of the pool hall all evening. And Fletcher—

"Well, you know where I was. The manager at the movie saw me go in."

"We checked Farley already," the fat cop said, looking at his notes. "Farley saw you go in at a quarter to eight, and he saw you come out at five after ten. But what does that prove? You could have gone in and out that side door a dozen times in the evening."

"No."

"She stepped out on you Saturday and

Wid Small brought her home. She was hysterical. We got witnesses. You found out tonight and went after him but he was too tough. You ducked into the movie for an alibi, sneaked out and came back to the house and slugged her. And that's the way we'll make it stick in court."

Drunkenly, Fletcher shook his head. No use, they wouldn't believe him. He'd told Lita to go out. "Have a good time honey, we'll have our party tomorrow night," he'd said. He trusted her. He wasn't going to cramp her style, if he had to be out of town jockeying a 42-passenger bus around on Saturday nights.

The law—he'd always feared the law. It wasn't meant to take care of little guys like him. The law wasted all its power coddling the rich and the politicians. The law was a fat sloppy cop. It was a sharp young punk who'd been to college and was climbing ahead in the D.A.'s office.

"All right," he moaned. "You might as well take me in. I can't prove anything and you won't believe the truth."

The fat cop went upstairs with him while he picked up handkerchiefs and underwear. The cop wanted the bathroom and Fletcher showed him. Then he walked back down the hall to his and Lita's room. It still had her things around—mess of women's stuff on the dressing table, nightgown laid out on the bed.

He cried when he saw that.

Numbly, he flung open the closet door and ran rough hands lovingly over her clothes. Not seeing the pink dress, he pulled others aside until he found it away at the back. She must have hated it to put it back so far.

He gasped when he held it up. It was torn at the neck almost to the waist. The whole thing was mud-stained and it had smaller tears. Thistles and twigs clung to it.

UNBELIEVING, he stared at it. The big rip in front—that would have been some guy grabbing at her—some drunk maybe. Then she'd run, had to get away from him. That would account for the rest.

Wid Small. Fletch thought of the knowing, wise-guy smirk on his face at the pool hall. The cabbie used to go with Lita before

Fletch moved to town. Wid could have come there that night, knowing Fletch and Lita had quarreled. He'd forced himself upon her and when she pushed him off he'd blown his top and killed her. Wid Small used to be his best friend. And Lita's too. But a guy could do crazy things. So it had been Wid.

His hand darted into the bureau drawer, groping for what he knew he'd find there—the cold metal of the little .25 automatic with the pearl handle. Softly, he walked back down the hall. It had seemed an hour since he came up here with the cop. Somebody downstairs grumbled at them to hurry.

He got behind the bathroom door.

The fat cop shambled out and Fletch clipped him behind the ear with the butt of the .25. The cop flopped on the floor.

Fletch got to the back of the hall, whipped up the window and stepped onto the shingled sloping roof above his back porch. A few autos and people were in the street in front of the house, but it was quiet back here. From inside came the pounding of heels on the stairs.

He jumped and hit hard, falling forward to his knees and ripping a trouser leg. The black outline of the fence loomed before him and he vaulted over. Chickens stirred with alarm at his left. Lights popped on in the second floor of the house behind him and he faintly heard the shouted curses. He went through a gate and then another and he was in the alley. He came out onto the next street beyond, a block from his house. It was lined with trees.

A police car swung around the block, lights glaring into side areas. He flung himself behind a hydrangea bush, fingers gripping the automatic. The car rolled by and stopped another block away. Cops got out of it and started along the sidewalks with flashlights.

Fletch slipped off his shoes, counted to three and sprinted across the street. He kept running until each breath jabbed his chest like a hot knife. He slipped his shoes on.

Wid Small lived at Mrs. Williams's boarding house, two blocks from the depot cab stand. Fletcher ran again, his breath stab-

bing his chest, the little gun burning in his hand. Sirens groaned in the distance.

They were giving him a chance, one chance to get Small before they closed in. Then, he thought grimly, they'd have a case against him for sure. One killing he hadn't done; one he had. But he would have to hurry. The pain ate into his chest like something alive.

At last, on the black and deserted street in front of Mrs. Williams's house, Fletcher stood unseen in the shadows. He took a few seconds to get his breath back. The gun felt better in his hand now. He was getting used to it. In the next block a car turned the corner and coasted to a stop. He cringed against a tree, waiting, unsure.

ALL WAS silent again, so unbearably silent he could stand it no longer. He had cooled off and the sweat was ice clammy under his arms. He walked across the street and started up the long set of wooden steps, thinking suddenly that he didn't know which room Small had.

Well, he'd go through the house if he had to. He'd find the dirty louse, somewhere.

Suddenly, he was aware of motion in the shadows behind the door. Something exploded; there was a flare, a blast, and he was hit, sharp and hard in the side.

In reflex, he squeezed the trigger of the little automatic and it spat back at the doorway three times. Then, stumbling a little, he got back down the steps. A siren came closer.

Wid Small had been warned and had waited for him. Sobbing with frustration, Fletch shambled to the sidewalk, away from the siren. He'd only been angry before, now he felt fear and pain also. He stuck the gun back in his pocket. His side hurt. It was hard to straighten up.

Out of the darkness a coupe cruised toward him and swung around to the curb beside him. Fletch felt for the gun.

The slightly worried, plump face of Pete Farley looked out at him. "Hiya," he called. Fletcher groped toward the car, glad of a chance to sit down. His mind felt drugged, his thoughts were far away and confused.

The car radio was turned on low, and

crackled with the dry voices of the county police radio system. Dimly, Fletch knew it talked about him. He sank down on the seat gratefully. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Farley U-turned and they dodged down the street. "Trouble, huh?" he said.

"Plenty!" The car gathered speed. "Listen, Pete. I need this car."

"I know. I'll take you wherever you want to go."

"Maybe you just better give me the car. I don't want to get you mixed up in this."

"Never mind," Farley said. "I'll be okay."

Fletch gritted his teeth as they jolted over a bump. His side still hurt. "I guess I'll have to take it away from you," he said, feeling for the automatic.

"Don't be silly. They could trace you easy. I got a better idea—a place to hide out until they ease off. My cabin."

Fletcher was feeling sicker. Hell, he thought, why bother? They'll get me. It didn't matter any more. If he'd got Small, it didn't matter any more. The books were squared and it didn't matter.

He held his side. "Go ahead," he said. "Let's find the cabin."

Farley's mountain hideaway on the Big Bend road was secluded enough and had all the comforts. Farley helped Fletch tape the slight flesh wound and said he guessed he'd be getting back to town.

"Thanks, pal," Fletcher said. "You're a great guy." He grabbed Farley's hand. "I don't know why you'd bother with a bum like me."

Farley's eyes, set far back, showed a lot of white. He grinned, looking slightly like a comic Satan. "I don't want to see you get a dirty deal. You got enough grub here to keep you until I can bring more out."

Fletcher watched the twin tail-lights swing down the side road to the highway. Then he lay down by the cabin door, watching. His side was feeling better. He would hole up here overnight until the first heat of the cop's hunt wore off. Then he'd light out. When Farley came back with his groceries, he'd find Fletch gone.

The wind flowed softly through Douglas fir and sugar pines. Down on the highway,

about two miles, he could see the lights of cars. The exhaust of the big diesel trucks on the night run over the mountain rumbled to him faintly. He'd catch a ride on one of those.

He was very tired; he slept.

HE AWOKE with a start, some sense of danger prodding him. He was cold and cramped from the night air. He couldn't tell how long he'd slept, but it was still dark. His side hurt worse. Then he heard it, a car laboring up the hill from the highway.

He got to his feet. The car's headlights were already flashing in the clearing in front of the cabin. Fletcher moved through the dark cabin to the rear door and slipped outside. He looked at the gun. Three shots remained.

Keeping to the shadows, he circled the house. The car stopped in the clearing, its lights shining on the little waterfalls of dust it had stirred up. Wid Small got out.

Stumbling a little in the dark, Small went to the cabin door. "Fletch," he called. "Fletcher. Where the hell are you?" His voice was strained. As well as Fletch could see by the car lights, Small was unarmed.

"Don't move," Fletcher said coldly from the shadows. "I got a gun on you." Like a damn fool, Fletcher thought, he walked in here without a gun. Well, he was cold meat now. But Fletch felt no exultation. There was nothing good about it. The hatred he'd had for Small was burned out now, wiped away by the exchange of shots and the blood he had given. Lousy shooting.

"Listen," Small said. "Call it off, Fletcher. I didn't do anything to you. Some guy phoned me tonight, said you were looking for me. When you came up those stairs holding that gun in front of you I got nervous, I guess."

Fletcher felt the hatred welling up in him again. "By God," he rasped bitterly, "I won't miss you this time." He held the gun out so Small could see it. He wanted to drag it out a little, let Small think about what was coming.

"You killed her, Wid. You louse. The only guy I thought was my friend."

"You're crazier than a pet coon," Small

said. His voice was weakly jocular, but quavering. "Do you think I would walk up here wide open like this if I had anything to be afraid of?"

"Dumb, maybe," Fletcher agreed. "You were plenty dumb to kill her, anyway, because you ought to have known I'd get you for it if it was the last thing I did. Go on inside, Wid, I want to talk to you about it. I want to tell you what she looked like. I want you to be thinking about it when those bullets rip your guts apart, because that's where I'm going to give it to you. Right in the belly."

Fletcher choked up. He felt hot tears starting down his cheek and he brushed them away angrily. Talking about it had given him a new, feverish hatred. He was beginning to enjoy his role, his mind dwelling on the pain he would inflict on Lita's murderer. After that, they could have him. Or he would kill himself. That was it.

He flicked on the lights.

WID SMALL, he saw, was sweating, although the night was cold. Wid started to talk, fast.

He told Fletcher how he'd rushed down the steps at the boarding house after the shooting, and recognized Farley's car as it picked Fletcher up. He'd waited at home for some word that Fletcher had been caught or had given himself up. When Fletcher didn't show, he began to figure where he might have gone. It had taken him awhile to find Farley's cabin.

"I know why you have it in for me," Small said. "They told you I brought Lita home Saturday night. That's true. But nobody knows the rest." He took a deep breath.

"She would have told you, finally," he said. "But she knew how crazy jealous you were and she was afraid you'd blow your top."

Fletcher growled. He was hopped up to kill, now. "I'm tired of all this talk," he grumbled. "What are you driving at, anyway?"

"She was in a hell of a mess," Small said. He stared at the floor. "She called me from Five Points, the service station just a couple

miles down over the hill here. I drove the cab out to pick her up—it was after twelve then and I went on the job at midnight. Earlier, I saw her at the Bella Vista school-house dance. She was having a swell time, pretty as a bug in that pink dress of hers.

"Cripes, I don't know what had happened. She was half crazy, all muddy and full of stickers and her dress was ripped. She was scared mostly of what you'd think. She begged me to get her home in a hurry, and not to say anything."

Doubt began to ferment in Fletcher's thoughts. A dull throbbing hammered at his skull. He let the gun droop and Small stood up, quickly. "Watch it," Fletcher growled. Small moved toward him.

"I want you to go on in and give yourself up," Small said, "before you get in worse trouble, Fletcher. That's what I came out here for."

Small was close in. Fletcher screamed. "Get back, damn it!" Small reached for Fletcher in a bear hug.

Fletcher swung his fist, the little .25 in it, and battered Small over the eye. The gun exploded and blood spurted from Small's face as he crashed soddenly to the floor. Fletcher backed away, his hands shaking. The big man lay limp.

Fletcher looked at him closely. Small's face was pocked with powder burns, but the bullet had missed. The blood came from a gash made by the gun butt.

Breathing deep, Fletcher tried to pull his scrambled thoughts together. He wasn't ready to give up yet—not without a last bit of checking. With wire coat hangers from the closet he bound Small's hands and feet, and dragged him into the sleeping porch that opened off the main cabin.

Outside, the new day was lighting up. Fletcher felt knocked out, muscles and wits succumbing to physical and nervous fatigue. Five Points station lay down the hill, two miles away. He took Small's auto and aimed it for there, not certain of what he was looking for.

IT WAS nothing but a battered gas station with the owner's quarters above. Fletcher beat on the door until he heard curses and

grumbling within.

The door was flung open and an angry man peered out. Fletcher jammed his way in. "I want to know what happened here last Saturday night," he started. "A woman was in trouble—"

"I don't know anything," the man said.

Fletcher showed him the gun. The man in the bathrobe eyed it.

"There was a woman," he said slowly. "She was in a fix. Said there had been a wreck but I never did see sign of one. She used the phone and a taxi came for her from town. That's all I know."

Fletcher looked at the old-fashioned wall phone. Tucked behind it was a bit of rolled-up cloth. He caught his breath when he saw it. The man in the bathrobe followed his glance. "She tore it off her dress," he said. "I didn't think to take it down."

Fletcher grabbed it—pink gossamer with tiny blue flowers. She had been in trouble long before she ever met Wid. And who else was handy out in this neighborhood? For miles, nothing but the highway and—Pete Farley's cabin. He rolled the pink cloth up and stuck it in his pocket.

He used the phone. Pete Farley's hello was sleepy.

"I need your help," Fletcher said. "I've got a trap set for Wid Small. Meet me at your cabin in half an hour."

He raced Small's car back up the cabin road, fearful he would not beat Farley there. Almost before he got the car hidden he heard the laboring of an engine behind him.

He unrolled the pink remnant and left it fluttering on the steps. Then he dug himself into the pine needles and waited. The coupe roared into the clearing and Farley sprang out. He stared about, his plump face strangely taut. Then he walked toward the cabin.

Fletcher's blood pressure went down a notch when he saw Farley walk by the strip of pink garment. He had passed it by two steps when he stopped short and turned slowly around. He picked it up, staring silently at it for a moment, then walked on into the cabin. Fletcher counted up to 20 and got up from the ground. He was feeling stiff, tired and sour. His wound hurt now with a dull pain.

In the still dark cabin Farley was down on his knees at the fireplace, a match flickering in his hands as he touched it to a pile. Seeing Fletcher, he sprang up. For a moment he looked apprehensive, and then relaxed as he saw the flames catch at the little pile of cloth and paper.

Farley half smiled, but the smile went away when he saw Fletcher's pain-crazed eyes and the look of desperate hatred that was in them. Fear showed in Farley's own eyes and widened and deepened as Fletcher moved on him slowly. Groping, Farley seized the heavy length of iron poker.

Fletcher rushed at him, forgetting his gun, desiring, in his blood-red passion, to shake the life from Farley with his bare hands.

Farley shook him aside and clubbed him across the face with the poker. Fletcher went down, helpless, but not cut. He stared at Farley through a red haze of hatred. The plump man shook the poker and his face glowed with a killer's madness. He screamed at Fletcher.

"So you finally guessed it, you ignorant clown. Of course, I killed her. I worshipped her. I had to kill her to save her from corruption by a crude spoiler. Lita—she was always mine—on a plane far above anything you could understand, Fletcher."

He bent over Fletcher, slapping at him. Tears ran down his pink, plump cheeks. "The police will be here in a few minutes—just in time to witness an execution. You can have your choice, attack me or make a run for it. Either way I kill you."

FROM the bedroom Fletcher heard Wid Small, shuffling over the floor, but he knew he must still be bound. If this crazy man found him it would mean Wid's death too. Fletcher wanted to cry out, to warn him to hide.

"Get up on your feet and die," Farley screamed. "Die, spoiler. Then her memory will be pure again."

He lashed at Fletcher with the poker and Fletcher felt the blood dripping from his forehead. In one split second of sanity he saw Wid Small, still bound hand and foot, but crawling from the bedroom.

Farley leaped, his feet aiming for Fletcher's groin.

Small shrieked and Fletcher wrenched himself away from Farley's heels. Farley came for him again, swinging the poker. Fletcher cringed as he took the blow. He felt the weight of the gun in his shirt front and got his hands on it, rolling away on the floor as Farley rushed him again, screaming gibberish.

The poker came up for the last finishing blow.

Fletcher, holding the gun in both hands, shot him through the throat. Farley clutched at himself as the blood bubbled out with the inarticulate sounds of his voice. The crimson flowed over his plump hands, it spread to his plump pink face. The last sound came out with a strangled gurgle and Farley gave up, dead.

Fletcher crawled to his feet, feeling only the unreality of an awakening from a nightmare. His face bled from Farley's blows, and dripped on Small as he awkwardly released him.

"He was nuts, wasn't he?" Small said, his voice awed. "She told me she came here after the dance, thinking it was to be a party. He had other ideas."

"Why in hell didn't you tell me?"

"I knew you'd go after him. So did she. That's why she didn't tell. I wanted you locked up before you got him. That's why I had the gun at Mrs. Williams's."

Fletcher snorted, but he knew Wid had tried to do right. And he might not have caught on, but for the dress. Lita had torn it long before she met Wid that night. And Farley's talk about movie times had been more to alibi himself than to help or hurt Fletcher.

He walked to the fireplace, poking at the remnants of the fire. Suddenly, flames burst from it and the piece of pink dress went up with a puff of smoke. For a moment, he seemed to see her there, dark eyes crinkling at him, black curls swinging as she danced in the pink dress, its full skirts swirling.

"Lita," he sobbed, and in angry frustration, kicked the fire out. In the last glow of the embers she smiled at him, and then it was all dark and cold and empty. ● ● ●

ASSORTED MAYHEM

Cambridge, Mass., police had little trouble nabbing a would-be holdup man making his first robbery attempt. He'd wounded his intended victim three times, but in the excitement also shot himself in the leg.

●

In Cincinnati, an escaped prisoner was seized by FBI men in the Federal Building when they found him admiring his likeness among the "Wanted" posters.

●

Four German political prisoners escaped from a Soviet concentration camp after they'd been put to work in the camp as locksmiths. They just made themselves some skeleton keys and opened the necessary doors.

●

A shortage of State prison guards caused the Rhode Island Civil Service commission to abandon minimum height and weight requirement for the job. The only requirement left—good health.

●

At Lakewood, N. J., a thief snatched a woman's handbag containing \$1.25, not bothering the bag in her other hand. It contained \$17,000.

●

In Minneapolis, a thief broke into the home of Mrs. Richard Tucker and took nothing but the kitchen sink.

●

It was understandable when a holdup man became so nervous when a chewing gum rack in a Miami store he was victimizing fell to the floor that he promptly turned and fled. Above the store is the headquarters of the FBI.

By HAROLD HELFER

THE COP WAR

A Novelet by PHILIP WECK

Chapter 1

I HIT the station at four o'clock that night, right on the button, and as soon as roll-call was over the lieutenant called me in.

"Kane," he said, "your partner's still playing sick. I'll ride with you tonight."

Well, what could I do? Tell the lieutenant, no, anybody but you. Tell him that he's the biggest heel in the Department and that every copper hates his guts, and you'd give up a week's pay to get out of it?

Not when the lieutenant's big, tough, Richie Sheridan you don't.

So I said, "Yes, sir."

Then Stan Lomsky came in. Stan is a good boy, handy with a gun, hard-working. He's also a boy with a tough row to hoe—seven hungry kids.

"Lieutenant," he said, "my girl's sick."

Richie was chewing on a toothpick. "Yeah?" he asked.

"My daughter. They took her to the hospital this morning."

"Yeah?"

"My wife would like to see her, Lieutenant. But somebody's got to look after the other kids."

Richie took the toothpick out of his mouth and stared at it. "Yeah?"

"Well, gosh, Lieutenant, if I could get home for a couple hours—"

"Go ahead, Lomsky," Richie told him. "But you reported for duty, so the only thing I can do is turn you in as absent from your post. Right?"

I thought Stan was going to spit in his face. He didn't, though. He just said, "Thanks, Lieutenant," and turned to leave.

"Lomsky!" the lieutenant bellowed. "What kind of a crack was that?"

"What crack?"

"That 'Thanks, Lieutenant' stuff? Insubordination?"

I didn't hear the rest of it because I was outside on the phone, telling Marie, my wife, to get over to the Lomskys as fast as she could. And when I'd finished the lieutenant was waiting in the car.

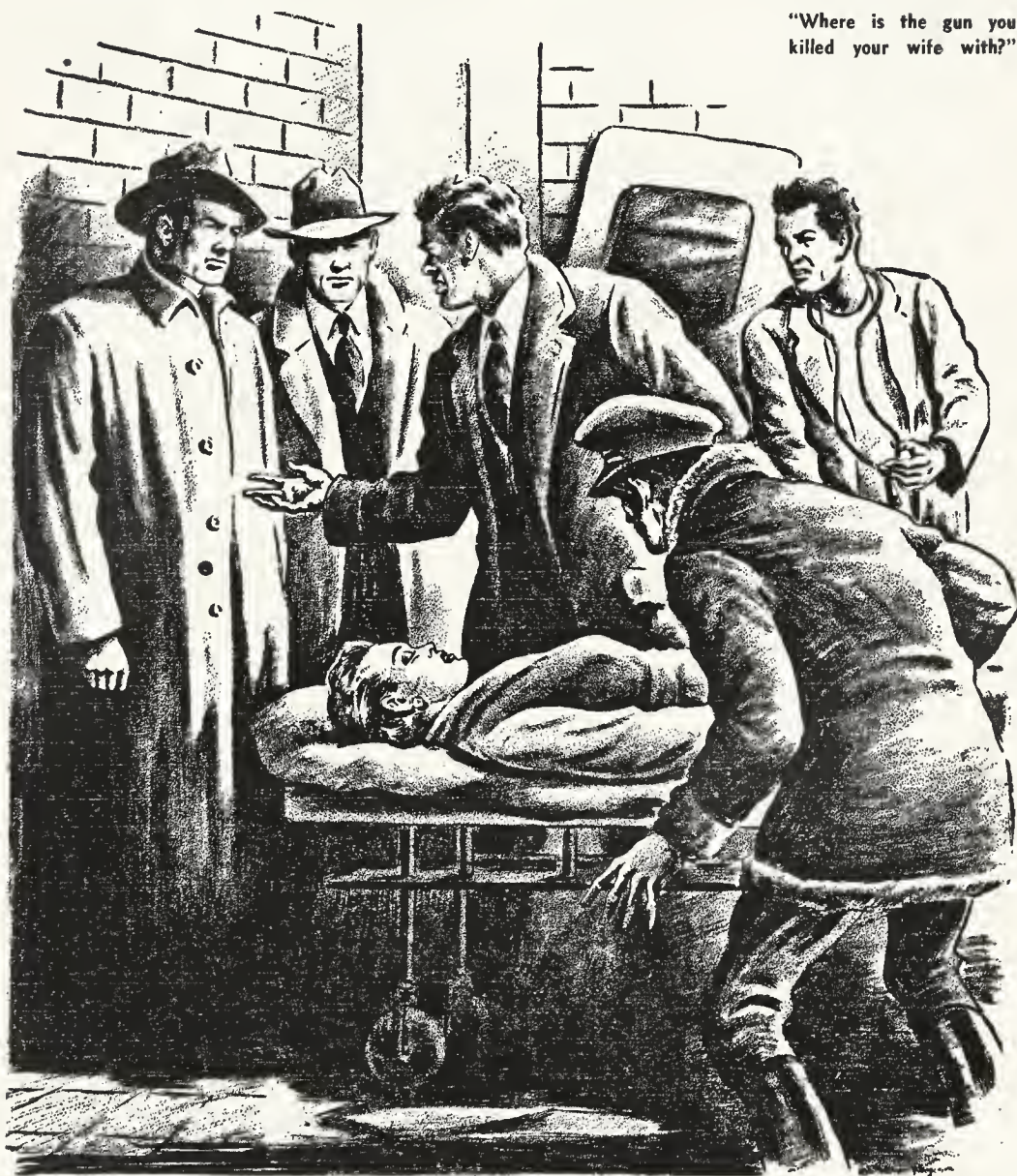
"Get the lead out!" he barked. "You're late!"

So I started the car and we cruised around, the way cops do night after night. We stopped a street fight between a couple of kids; we answered a prowler call and



*He wasn't a cop any more on the other
side of the city line. He was just another guy—six
feet of target and 200 pounds of meat!*

*"Where is the gun you
killed your wife with?"*



didn't find anybody; we spotted a drunk.

He was a nice-looking fellow, this drunk, old, sitting down on the sidewalk and leaning against a street-light. Richie picked him up with one hand. He has big, strong hands—I've seen him smash a quarter-inch door panel in one swing.

HE PICKED this drunk up and for almost a minute he stared into the old man's face. Then he let go and the old man slumped to the sidewalk and cracked his head on the lamp-post and flopped over on his stomach.

Richie climbed back into the car and said, "Get going, Kane," and we left the old man there. With a broken skull, maybe.

Yeah, that was Richie Sheridan. Lieutenant Richie Sheridan. The lad who was riding with me, and with the bad wishes of a hundred cops, that rainy, slushy night.

Five years ago when we were both new in plainclothes I rode with Richie all the time, and I wouldn't have changed places with any copper in Chicago. He was an easygoing, slow and friendly big fellow then.

But a lot of things can happen to a man in five years. And they'd all happened to Richie Sheridan.

About ten-thirty that rainy night, on South State, Richie said, "Let's take a break."

I pulled over to the curb in front of one of those South State dives. A dingy, crummy dive, with rumdums and winos sitting around inside.

We parked there while Richie went into the smoke joint. The snow was falling past the neon signs and turning into rain before it hit the headlights of our squad car, and into slush and mud when it splashed on the street. I wondered how long I could take it, riding with Richie Sheridan.

After about ten minutes he came out and I pulled away.

He said, "Remember Zaborsky?"

Yeah, I remember Zaborsky. A hood, one of the Syndicate's boys. On the lam for the past two years over an armored-truck hold-up that went sour.

"He's back," the lieutenant said.

"Where?"

"The Bronze Lantern."

Well, that was out of our jurisdiction,

none of our business. Call in about it, and let the county cops handle it.

Sheridan said, "We're going to knock him over."

"Us?" I cried. "You mean me and you?"

"That's just what I mean, Kane. What's the matter—you afraid of him?"

I kept on to the Outer Drive and headed south, past the steel mills and then to Avenue O and on out. As the windshield wipers slapped back and forth I wondered what was up. Why the interest in Zaborsky?

I might have known. Zaborsky, hell! It was a skirt Richie Sheridan was chasing.

That was what had changed him. A dame.

The night I first got wind of it, five years ago, we'd been on the four to midnight shift, Richie and me. About three A.M., a couple hours after I got home, one of the cops who lived in the neighborhood had called me up.

"Kane," he'd said, "you'd better get over to Frank's Bar in a hurry. Your partner's tearing the joint apart."

I said, "Richie?" I couldn't believe it.

"You're damn right it's Richie! He's blown his top! Hurry!"

I got over there all right, and it was Richie.

Ever see a big man like that, two hundred pounds of muscle, a slow-moving, even-tempered fellow, when he really flips his lid? When he decides to wreck things? Except that nobody ever flipped his lid like Richie that night.

He was standing behind the bar, his hair disheveled, his face red, his clothes torn. One big paw was wrapped around the bartender's throat; the other one was holding a piece of jagged glass an inch away from the fellow's eyes. The big mirror behind the bar had been smashed; the whisky bottles had been brushed to the floor and broken; tables had been turned over; a chair had been staved in. The place was a mess.

And Richie was just about to slash the bartender's throat!

I vaulted over the bar beside him.

"For hell's sake, Richie!" I bellowed. "Let him go!"

Richie swung on me. With that piece of jagged glass in his hand, he swung right at my eyes.

I'M NO match for Richie in strength, but he's slow. I saw it coming and stepped inside it and grabbed his wrist and twisted it behind him. Then I clouted him one on the back of the neck, the kind that puts them out for awhile.

I said to the crowd, "What's the matter with him? Is he drunk?"

Frank, the bartender, rubbed his throat a couple times. "Hell, no, he ain't drunk. It's that wife of his. She's been spending her savings in here with that slick-haired dancing instructor and Sheridan just found out about it. I don't know why the hell he took it out on me."

I did. When a man like Richie blows his top he takes it out on anybody. Anybody and everybody he can reach.

I dragged him out to the car and drove him home to his dark, empty apartment and rolled him into bed. I didn't see him again for a month. He went on sick leave and I was transferred downtown to the Robbery Squad. I didn't look him up, either, to say a friendly good-by. I don't feel friendly with fellows who slash at me with a sliver of glass.

When I did run into him again it was after his wife had left him. He brought a couple ex-cons into our office on a gun charge. They looked like they'd been through a meat grinder, and they sang so fast about everything they'd ever done we could hardly get it down.

That was what had happened to Richie Sheridan. He was still taking it out on everybody and anybody.

And he kept it up. He developed a lot of sources of information, got a lot of stool-pigeons, and was made sergeant, then lieutenant, and he was tough and mean and strict. Now I was transferred back to district duty and my new partner, Johnny Yancey, had fallen down a flight of stairs breaking up a drunk fight and here I was, riding with Richie Sheridan again.

And a woman was in the picture again.

I didn't know it until past midnight, when Sheridan said, "Officially we're off duty. You better call in and tell 'em where we are."

The only phone I could find was in an all-

night garage and I went in and reported and when I came out of the garage office there she was. Life-size, and plastered against the wall, and nude! Completely nude, with her body turned to one side, and a teasing look in her eyes, a come-and-get-me look. It said under the poster:

MAUDE MULLER

Rake the hay with Maude Muller.

At the Bronze Lantern Tuesday, March 19.

Maud Muller, eh? I'd never known her as well, and I'd never liked her because a babe like that is dynamite when she's your partner's wife. But I couldn't be wrong. That poster was made from a photograph, and Maude Muller had once been Mrs. Richie Sheridan.

I went out to the car and got in behind the wheel and just sat there, trying to figure it.

Mrs. Richie Sheridan doing a strip act at a tough, hood-operated roadhouse. And Richie, left flat, still taking it out on anybody and everybody.

I didn't want any part of it.

Beside me, Sheridan said, "Come on—come on, let's go!"

I didn't budge.

"What the hell's the matter with you; Kane? Get a move on!"

"Lieutenant," I told him slowly, "I'm a cop and you can order me around on police business. But I'm damned if you can order me into any personal feud of yours. No, sir!"

His face turned beet red. I thought he was going to slug me. Anybody else, any civilian for instance, talk like that to Richie Sheridan and he'd be in for a rough time. I've seen a couple of 'em try it, the small-time punks who thought they were tough. Just once they'd try it.

His big, giant fist was balled up tight and I was ready to duck fast, but he didn't swing. His voice got cold, like he was trying to keep from bellowing.

He said, "Kane, you're on police business any time I say so. You're going out to pick up a fugitive named Zaborsky. Until you can prove this is a personal feud of mine and bring charges, you damn well do what

I tell you! Now get going!"

I got going. Right into it, too, boy.

Chapter II

THE Bronze Lantern was a Syndicate joint, the police were sure. The lads out there didn't take any nonsense. But neither did Richie Sheridan.

Bill Kane was going to be in the middle again.

About twelve-thirty we rolled up to the parking lot west of the Lantern, half a mile beyond the town of Burnham. A little old man waved us in with his flash. I shut off the radio, locked the car, and we went in. Our eyes open and our hands by our sides. Walk into a spot like the Bronze Lantern looking for trouble, and you're going to get it.

The usual clip joint, that's all it seemed to be. A hat-check girl with her ribs hanging out as she leaned over her counter. A long bar off to the side, and a head waiter who resembled an ape—wide shoulders, long arms, big, hamlike fists. He tried to stop us when we went by the check-room with our topcoats still on, but Richie flipped the tin at him and shoved him aside.

It was calm enough on the main floor. Nobody at the bar except a couple of punks. About thirty people in the cabaret were ogling a dumpy, middle-aged blonde who was doing a strip. Half a dozen waiters were standing around. That was all.

No sign of Maude Muller. No sign of anybody with a card on his back stating that his name was Zaborsky. No sign of trouble yet.

But Sheridan spotted a doorway on one side, made a beeline for it, and we were backstage. Back there, this Bronze Lantern looked like what it was—an old farmhouse remodeled into a night club. A long hallway had a couple doors leading off it, back stairs at one end, a kitchen at the other, and part of the wall had been torn out to make room for the stage. On it the blonde was still doing her bumps. To our left, toward the kitchen, a short, squat, gray-haired fellow was parked on a stool—the watchman. And almost in front of us, on one of the doors, was the name "Maude Muller". The door

was closed but you could see a crack of light under it.

Gray-haired that watchman might be, but he was on the ball.

"Outside, you two!" he bellowed as he bore down on us.

Richie didn't even answer. Instead he headed for the door with the name, "Maude Muller," on it.

"Outside!" the watchman yelled again. "Where do you think you're going?"

The door was locked. Sheridan grabbed the knob and swayed back a bit, to put his shoulder through it, and the watchman grabbed his wrists.

"Scram, you!" Gray-head howled.

Richie clipped him. Flush on the jaw.

The fellow skidded backward about six feet, tripped over something and sat down, hard. Richie swung around on the door again.

But before he could smash into it, that door opened.

It wasn't Maude Muller. It was a big fellow, a man as tall as Richie and almost as broad-shouldered, a fellow with rumpled sandy hair, the tanned face of a farmer, and wearing a wrinkled soft shirt and suspenders.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. He pushed the lieutenant on the chest and caught him off-balance, shoving him back a step, then closed the door behind him.

And Sheridan clipped him, too.

Back he flew, his head banging against the door with a crack.

That crack and the punch would have knocked a lot of men out. But this farmer was no set-up. He stood there, swaying for just a second, blood trickling down the corner of his mouth. Then he got his left up just in time, blocked the next punch, and swung himself.

It might have been a good one to watch, but over my shoulder I spotted the watchman reaching for his hip pocket and I had to dive for him. I got him just in time and put a clamp on his wrist. Then five or six waiters, the hood who'd stopped us at the front door and a couple of lads from the kitchen hit us.

Somebody slapped me across the back of the neck, and somebody else got a forearm

in my Adam's apple, then I was yanked to my feet and held there against the wall while three of them pinned Sheridan's arms back.

They frisked us and took our guns and identification. The farmer looked at the badges.

"Sheridan, eh?" he said. "Lieutenant Richard Sheridan. The guy who got left behind, huh?"

"Let's drag 'em out in the yard and work 'em over," the watchman said.

But the farmer shook his head. "No, I want the management to handle this. Get 'em upstairs."

SO THEY marched us up those stairs and down another long hall and into a little office, one of those offices the hoods copy from Hollywood, with a couple of desks in that cheap blond wood, a thick, soft carpet, mirrors, and pictures all over the walls.

And a skeleton sitting behind one of the desks glaring at us.

That was what he looked like—a rack of bones with some clothes thrown over the shoulders, skin stretched tight over the skull, pulling the lips thin, making the cheek-bones stick out and the eyes big and empty and cold. Tiny blue veins were all over the face and a long, white scar, running back from the corner of the left eye, looked as if the skin had cracked there from being stretched too much.

"Well?" he said. His voice was hollow, the kind of a voice to be expected from a corpse.

The farmer tossed Sheridan's badge on his desk.

Skull-Face barely glanced at it. "That's no good here," he said. "This is out of the city limits."

Richie said, "We're looking for a man."

"You got a warrant?" Skull-Face asked.

I could smell trouble when he said that. Like the smell of electricity in the air; like the smell of a soft, squishy tomato somebody's ready to throw. A warrant? Nobody pulls that warrant gag on a cop, unless he's stupid or ready to back it up with muscle.

That's just what Skull-Face was ready to do.

"Got a warrant?" he asked again.

Sheridan said, "Sure, we got a warrant."

He took one of those pictures off the wall, smashed the glass on his knee, and pulled the picture out. Then he grabbed a pen from its stand on the desk and wrote one word on the back of that picture. That word was "Warrant." He handed the picture to Skull-Face. And it was just as if he was saying. "Go ahead, Ugly. Put us out—if you're big enough."

Skull-Face turned bright red. He glared at Sheridan, the skin on his face even tighter than it had been. He didn't even look at the writing; he handed it to the farmer.

"Is it legal?" he asked.

The farmer didn't look at it either. "No," he said, "It ain't. But here's something that is."

He tossed his own wallet on the table, open to the card-carrying section.

On one side was a policeman's badge. On the other side was an identification card. On that badge it said:

Sergeant Wayne Powers
Sheriff's Highway Patrol

So that was who the farmer was—Sergeant Wayne Powers of the Sheriff's Police. That was who was running errands for the hoods, acting as bouncer, coming out of Maude Muller's dressing room in his shirt sleeves, his hair rumpled.

"Around here, Lieutenant Sheridan," he said, "I'm the boss, see? On everything. You do as I say about serving warrants, about making arrests, about going into a girl's dressing room. See?"

"You scum!" Sheridan roared. "You dirty, yellow scum!"

Guns or no guns, he would have slugged Powers again if I hadn't stepped in between them.

"Let's take 'em out back and work 'em over, Wayne," the watchman said.

But Skull-Face shook his head. "No. Take 'em out and let 'em go. And see that they don't come back."

They marched us down the stairs at gunpoint, those narrow stairs leading backstage. We could hear the brassy music of the band; we could hear the customers whistling and clapping. And then we could see what they

were whistling at.

Maude Muller. She was really raking the meadows with that number. A strip, sure—all the way; not even the few inches of cheesecloth the Commissioner measures out for chorus girls in the city.

But it wasn't her nakedness. It was the dance, the way she stepped and gyrated and wriggled, with that half-smile on her face, that come-on, here-I-am-big-boy smile. It wasn't a dance. It was an invitation to every man in the house.

"How do you like it, copper?" Sergeant Wayne Powers asked. He was standing right behind Sheridan.

"Let's get out of here," Sheridan said.

THEY took us out in the rain and put us into our car without another word, all three of them—sergeant Wayne Powers, the watchman, and the head waiter, and we drove off. A quarter-mile after we hit the hard top I saw a pair of headlights through the murk, coming out of that same parking-lot and turning after us.

"They're going to put us to bed, Lieutenant," I said.

Locked in a case behind the front seat of our special squad cars there was a riot gun. Richie reached over the seat and took it out.

"For hell's sake!" I yelled. "Put that thing down!"

But he didn't; he cocked it.

"Pull over on the left side of the road," he said.

"Look, Lieutenant, don't be a sap!" I told him. "Don't—"

"Pull over, Kane! That's an order!"

So I pulled over and those headlights, only a quarter-mile behind us, gained in a hurry.

"Don't!" I cried. "For God's sake—"

He didn't answer me.

I unbuckled my pistol and got it out and jammed it into the lieutenant's back.

"You pull the trigger, Sheridan," I said softly, "and so do I."

As if he hadn't heard me, he sat there without moving a muscle, and those headlights came closer and closer.

"Remember," I said.

Still he didn't budge.

Then that tailing car was up beside us—County Car 18 I could see now, through the rain. The watchman was driving. Powers was beside him.

Sheridan had the riot gun square on their windshield. They wouldn't have had a chance.

But he didn't shoot. Instead he bawled at them, "Keep moving, boys! Keep right on moving! Fast!"

And they did. We stayed where we were until their tail-lights disappeared.

Then the lieutenant said, "Kane, put your gun away."

I put it away.

"That could mean your badge," he told me.

I said, "Yeah, I guess it could."

On through the rain and the night we drove, back toward the city. Whipped. Beaten. All because a stubborn lieutenant of police tried to ring me into a personal fight.

It was three A.M. when we reached the station and as Sheridan got out he said, "Two o'clock tomorrow, Kane, at the Records Room downtown."

I said, "What?"

"You heard me!" he bellowed, and went on in, leaving me there on the sidewalk.

Two o'clock! I was on the four-to-twelve shift, and besides, that was my day off.

I thought, you slob! You bellowing, kid-beating, four-flushing coffee cop!

But I was there, all right. At two o'clock in the afternoon. What else could I do?

Chapter III

BY THE time I got to the records room, on the second floor, the lieutenant had pulled two sheets. One was the head waiter. "Stanley Bednar," it said. Three jolts—for assault, carrying concealed weapons and armed robbery. A dozen arrests on minor charges. The typical record of a hood.

The other was Charles Additis. Five or six pick-ups for gambling, suspicion, vagrancy. No conviction. Even with a little more flesh between his skin and bones and minus the scar along his eye I spotted him for the skeleton in the Bronze Lantern.

Sheridan handed me another batch of papers: Apparently he'd been over to the county clerk's office already.

The first was a bill of sale for the property on County Line Road at 189th Street, improved with a three-story house—the Bronze Lantern—from the estate of Henry Shepherd to Charles and Mary Additis, dated a few years before. Next came a lien on the property, signed by Charles and Mary Additis, to the amount of twenty thousand dollars, held by Midwest Enterprises. Midwest, according to another record, was a real-estate firm incorporated duly under the state laws, principal stockholder being one Casimir Zaborsky.

"This Mary Additis," Sheridan said. "She's Zaborsky's sister."

It all added up to this; Zaborsky still owned the Bronze Lantern. He had a gambling brother-in-law and a petty hood working for him, probably with the brother-in-law running the joint. And the county cops in on the pay-off.

But so what? Who cared?

"Let's see what we can get on Wayne Powers," the lieutenant said.

"Are you nuts?" I asked him. "That fellow's a copper. He couldn't have a record."

Turned out he didn't, according to our files. None of the Powers boys we carried had any resemblance to him.

"Okay, Lieutenant," I said when we'd finished the search. "So what's it all about? What's the difference? What's this going to get us?"

He shrugged. "Background. That's all, background. I guess we'd better get on out to the Bronze Lantern."

The Bronze Lantern! I could feel the red climbing up into my cheeks.

"What the hell," I said, "is eating you? What are you trying to do—get us both killed?"

He jabbed a finger against my chest. "I'm giving the orders, Kane! Who asked your opinion?"

If somebody rams a finger into your chest, it isn't hard to grab that finger, push down and out and break it. But the lieutenant must have seen what I had in mind because

he pulled the finger back.

"Go ahead, Kane!" he yelled. "Slug me! I'll break every bone in your body, and I'll get your badge, too!"

I said, "For Pete's sake!" turned on my heel and walked out of there. Downstairs I got into the car. In about five minutes he came out, got in the car, and said, "Head south."

After a couple blocks I said, "You're gonna get in a jam."

He had a cigarette in his mouth and he took it out and looked at it. "Kane," he said, "that's my business. Your job is to follow orders."

I still wouldn't quit. "Anything happens, nobody will fall for that gag of looking for Zaborsky."

Somehow I expected him to hellow at me. But instead his voice got quiet.

"That's what we're doing, Kane. You and me. Looking for Zaborsky. You want to pinch him and I want to put a slug in his belly, but we're both looking for him."

"You ain't going to shoot him down," I said, "and you ain't even going to hold him long if we don't make the pinch legally."

This time he did hellow. "Okay, okay, we'll do it legally. We'll go to the Spotswood station and turn it over to the county cops and see if that works. And by hell if it doesn't, we'll do it my way, see? And you'll keep your yap shut, Kane, or I'll write you up for insubordination, disobedience, insolence and every other charge I can think of!"

WE DROVE to the Spotswood office of the county police, in a quiet little suburb away out. The county had taken over a stone building there, a bank that went broke twenty years ago.

We marched in and some joker at a desk stopped us near the door.

"Who's in charge?" Sheridan asked him.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Powers."

Sure enough, it was. Sergeant Wayne Powers. The country boy with the apple red cheeks. He looked older in the daylight, with crow's feet around his eyes, but he was the same hard-faced monkey.

He said when we walked in, "Why don't you knock?"

Then he recognized us. Slowly he got to his feet, watching us, his arms stiff and bent at the elbows, ready to go for his gun.

Sheridan glared at him, just waiting for him to make a break.

"Take it easy," I told them both. "This isn't any gun fight."

Powers licked his cold lips, still watching us, wary.

"We got a tip," I said. "A man we want is supposed to be hiding out at the Bronze Lantern."

"What about it?" he asked.

"There's a warrant out for him and we thought you'd pick him up for us."

He said, "So you're doing it legal? I suppose you're going to make a report on this."

"You're damn right!" the lieutenant said.

Like a cat and dog those two were. Ready to slug it out or shoot it out or claw it out.

Powers said, "Okay, so I'll do it legal, too. Come on."

He breezed past us and we followed, into the radio room where they relay messages to the county highway cars, on a different frequency from ours. Working the mike was a plump, dowdy-looking babe and he took it away from her.

"Car Eighteen," he said. "Car Eighteen."

After a minute Car Eighteen answered: "Eighteen, at Ninety-first and Southeast Highway. Go ahead."

"Eighteen," Powers said, "we have a report that there's a fugitive hiding out at the Bronze Lantern. Proceed there and investigate."

"The name," Sheridan said, "is Zaborsky. Casimir Zaborsky. Wanted for armed robbery in Chicago."

Into the mike Powers said, "The name of the fugitive is Casimir Zaborsky. Got it, Eighteen?"

"Yeah, sure," the voice cracked out of the tinny little loudspeaker. "I got it, Wayne." Powers put the mike down.

"You mean," I asked, "you're not going out there?"

The lieutenant answered for him. "Not this afternoon. Not until the girls are there

for the floor show tonight. Isn't that right, Powers?"

"Shut up!" he barked. "Shut your mouth!" His face was a mahogany red and he glanced at the woman operator nervously.

Then surprisingly soon, the loudspeaker crackled again. "Car Eighteen reporting," it said. "Investigated at Bronze Lantern as ordered. No sign of any fugitive. Okay?"

"Okay," Powers said into the mike.

The lying bums! Both of them! Why, you couldn't get from Ninety-first and Southeast Highway in half an hour.

"There you are," Powers said. "Nice and legal. And get this." He shoved his jaw almost into Sheridan's. "Keep away from there, see? If I catch you in that joint again you're trespassing, and I can put a slug in your back."

I think they would have gone for their guns right then if I hadn't stepped in between them and half shoved the lieutenant out of that excuse for a police station.

As it was, Sheridan called over my shoulder, "I'll be there tonight, Powers. That's a date."

Powers didn't answer. He was saying something to the woman on the mike.

Back in the car, the lieutenant just sat there for a few minutes, his face pink, his big fists clenched.

Then he barked, "Head back to the city!"

FOR a minute I thought he was going to give up this Bronze Lantern deal. But I should have known better. Not Richie Sheridan. He doesn't give up, ever.

It turned out he had a source on the South Side and he wanted to get some lowdown on Sergeant Wayne Powers, some dirt on him.

But there wasn't any, except that he was a pretty rough character.

"You take a pinch from him," this source, a bartender, said, "and you're in for it. He's nasty, that's what he is, nasty."

The lieutenant had another source, a mechanic in the county garage who lived on the South Side, and we tried him, too. We got about the same story.

Powers was just a small-time boy. He'd

been a penitentiary guard once, then he'd moved up to the county police. He was small and narrow-minded and he was tough. Whatever his connection was, it had got him a sergeant's stripes and it had even got his wife a job on the sheriff's staff, too.

That was all.

But it could be enough. Take a punk like that, a wise-acre who thinks the world owes him a living, give him a uniform and a gun, and watch out, brother! You've got a mean cop, a man who wants everyone to know that he's the law and that what he says goes.

Take a guy like that and mix him up with a dame like Maude Muller and he won't let go. He'll start shooting first.

And that was the boy we were bucking. That was the boy Richie Sheridan had decided to take it out on. That was one boy who wouldn't stand still while Richie Sheridan dished it out.

We were heading right back into a hot spot, twice as hot now. All because of some cheap little minx, a stripper now, a floosie who bounced from one man to another, who wasn't worth fighting for.

I should have told Richie Sheridan that to his face. I was fed up with the whole deal.

But I didn't. I wasn't afraid of mixing it with him. Something else stopped me. No man can tell another man his wife's a bum, even if he's divorced. You know it, he knows it, the whole world knows it, but, you can't tell him. Let him find out for himself. Let him throw her in the gutter or do whatever else he pleases, but don't be the one to tell him.

About half-past nine that night Sheridan and I pulled into the parking lot behind the Bronze Lantern. It was a nice night, but kind of chilly. The stars were out, bright and clear, the only noise anywhere around was coming from the Bronze Lantern.

Maybe a dozen cars were already there when the stooped little old man guided us in with his flash. Soon as we were parked the lieutenant called him over to the car and grabbed him by the coat collar.

"Listen, Grandpa," he said, "you like it here?"

The old man was frightened. "Yes sir,

yes sir," he wheezed. "I like it fine."

"Ever been in the tank on South State Street?"

"No, sir. I mean yes, sir, only it wasn't my fault sir. Only a couple times."

"Well, Grandpa," Richie said, "I know you wouldn't want to go back. Just don't open your yap that we're here. See?"

"Yes, sir," Grandpa said. He licked his lips and his bleary, weak blue eyes were watering. "Yes, sir, I ain't going to say nothing. No, sir, I ain't."

So Sheridan let him go and the old man hobbled away.

As we sat there a couple of other cars pulled in, carrying cheap-looking blondes with long-haired, shifty-eyed punks escorting them. From the night club we could hear the tinny music, and once in a while a shout would come from an upstairs window, somebody making a heavy pass maybe in a dice game.

Nobody came out. No sign of Sergeant Wayne Powers or of anybody who looked like his name was Zaborsky.

For half an hour we sat there until we heard the band leader announce, "And now we bring you the gorgeous, the exotic, the breath-taking Maude Muller, direct from—"

Sheridan slipped out of the car, and I tagged after him, like a poodle.

Chapter IV

SHERIDAN and I circled the joint, passing right in front of the entrance. Nobody showed. We could hear the band going into the last take-em-off bars of the dance. We could almost hear the rattle of the dice. But we didn't hear anybody shouting, "Zaborsky!"

Finally we got around to the rear door, the one they'd booted us out of the night before. And as we got there, that door flew open.

Out came a babe. The babe. The gorgeous, the breath-taking, the exotic Maude Muller. Mrs. Richie Sheridan. Wearing some sort of a robe and running.

Running like she was being chased.

We stopped and she saw us and she veered right into the lieutenant. She grabbed him

by the arms, stared into his face, close to him.

"Richie!" she cried. "Richie! Thank God, Richie! You've got to get me out of here! Please!"

She was trembling, babbling, frightened to death.

"Richie!" she cried again, "Hurry, please! They'll kill me!"

He didn't move a muscle, didn't crack a smile. He stared at her as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Richie!" she babbled. "Please! Quick! Richie, you've got to!"

I grabbed one of her arms and turned her toward the parking lot.

"Okay, kid," I said. "Come on!"

We ran toward the car. Behind us, Sheridan just stood there, staring after us, as if he couldn't move.

Then I had to watch the babe, because she stumbled. She was really frightened, that girl. It was in every line of her face and every line of her body—and anybody sure could see those lines. She must have thrown the robe on right after her dance.

Anyway she was so frightened she couldn't run too well. She leaned on me more and more.

Finally I heard feet pounding behind us and the lieutenant was there, holding her left arm. At the parking lot we trotted past the old duffer who gaped at us with his mouth open.

That's when I thought she'd fainted. Her knees gave out and the lieutenant and I almost carried her the last few feet. He yanked the door open and I half-lifted, half-shoved her in, the robe catching and falling partly open. Sheridan scooted around and got behind the wheel.

Inside the car she looked at him and said in a soft, low voice, "Richie, take me home! Please!"

I am in a jam, she meant. Help me. Sure, I ran out on you, treated you like a dog. Sure, I'm a cheap strip dancer, wriggling around on the stage for anybody to stare at. But I'm in trouble now, so take me back.

Richie didn't say a word.

Then we heard a shout, the hoarse, loud bellow of a man barging out of the entrance

we'd just left. Another shout, the slamming of a door, and somebody was running toward us. Richie gunned the engine, swung around, and hit for the road.

The babe was lying back with her head against the back of the seat and when we turned onto the black-top she slumped a little toward me, and her head came down on my shoulder.

We hit a bump as Richie slammed into third and she bounced, and that robe came open a little more. Then we were off, picking up speed.

Twisting around, I watched the entrance to the parking lot. Nobody showed, no headlights swung into the highway after us. And in that bright starlight I could have seen a car even without lights.

When I turned back after half a mile the babe had slumped down further and the robe was almost wide open. And she must have tossed it on after the finale, and her costume for that was a pair of shoes.

I reached over to cover her—and caught a sharp breath. Under one of her breasts, a bit lower than the heart, was a tiny round red spot about the size of the end of a pencil. And the thin, red streak running straight down from it was blood.

"Pull over, Richie!" I yelled. "Pull over, you fool!"

I TRIED to find a heartbeat and I tried to find her pulse. I couldn't. Richie stopped and we got her out of the car and looked for the pulse and the heartbeat again and put a mirror over her mouth.

She was naked and warm and luscious and soft. And dead.

I turned her over to try artificial respiration.

"It's no use, Kane," Richie said. "It's no use. I knew it—I knew it."

"Look, you dope!" I yelled. "We're cops; we're not doctors. What would you do if you found somebody lying in the street? Dig a hole and dump the body in? Hell, no, you'd get her to a hospital."

He said, "It's too late, Kane. It's no use."

"Grab hold and get her in the car, you dope!" I bellowed.

We put her on the back seat and I yanked

the car around and dropped the siren and leveled, all the way down to the floorboards.

Richie, she'd called him. Richie, take me home. And now she was lying there stretched out on the back seat, white and beautiful and getting colder every second. And Sheridan, turned around beside me, was just sitting there staring at her, as if he couldn't stop, not saying a word.

He was right; we were too late. We screamed up to the emergency entrance of the Spotswood Hospital and huddled her out. A dark-haired shrimp of an intern slapped a stethoscope on her and lifted her arms up and opened her eyes and looked at them.

Then he said, "She's dead."

Shot to death. Dying even while she slumped between us in our squad car.

I asked the doc about it.

"Sure," he said. "It happens that way sometimes. Apparently she was hit in the lungs, just below the heart, rupturing a number of blood vessels. It must have been a small bullet because the wound closed up after it and most of the bleeding was internal. For a while she was able to talk and run and act normal but as soon as the lungs filled with blood—well, that was the end."

He went to a cigarette-scarred desk in that little emergency room and got out some papers.

"I have to file a report on this," he said. "You're officers, aren't you?"

I said, "Yeah, I guess so. Yeah, sure we are."

"Where did you find her?"

"The Bronze Lantern."

"Well," he said, "that explains the lack of clothes, I suppose. What's her name?"

Behind me, Richie was still staring at the dead girl. He'd pulled the robe over her and closed her eyes gently.

"What's her name?" the doctor asked again.

I shrugged. "Maude Muller is the one she used on the stage. I don't know her real name."

Richie spoke up then.

"It's Sheridan," he said. "Her real name is Sheridan. Mrs. Richard Sheridan."

The doc's pen went right on scratching over the paper he was filling in, the last chapter in the marriage of Richie Sheridan.

"You want to take this report with you?" the doctor asked.

I was going to snatch it, but Richie stopped me.

"No," he said. "You better phone it in. We'll wait."

Because this hospital was outside the city limits, the doctor phoned the county highway police. We knew who'd show up. The doctor had given her name in that telephoned report. Mrs. Richard Sheridan, also known as Maude Muller.

We sat and waited, and after awhile Richie started talking.

"She left me, Bill," he said. "She didn't want to be a cop's wife. She wanted to be a dancer. She ran off to Hollywood five years ago with some crummy agent and I never even knew what had happened to her until last night."

I said, "I'm sorry, Richie."

And we waited some more.

Pretty soon he came rushing in. Sergeant Wayne Powers, the country boy, with half a dozen country cops.

He looked at the body lying on the cart, tossed the robe back and peered at the tiny red wound, and covered her up again.

Then he stalked over to Richie.

"All right, Sheridan," he said. "Where's your gun?"

Richie handed it to him.

WITH a cold, dead pan Powers tossed it aside and it landed on the cart, on the girl's shoulder. Richie's big gun lying on her shoulder.

"Not that one, Sheridan," the sergeant said. "The gun you killed your wife with."

Richie shrugged and held his arms up, bent at the elbows. "That's the only gun I carry, Powers."

Country boy fanned him, then it was my turn and I held my hands up, too. Why crab at Powers?

They put us in separate cars and before they drove us off Powers came over to me.

"Kane," he said, "where's that twenty-two Sheridan-always carried?"

It was a pretty weak bluff and it didn't work. "What twenty-two?" I asked. "Why in the world would he want a popgun like that?"

They took us to the Spotswood station. No questioning. No rough stuff. Just a long ride, a county boy sitting beside me in the back seat where Maude Muller had danced her last dance, another county boy driving my car.

They booked me first. "Investigation," they said.

That's always a good charge. Put down "murder" or any other felony and you've got to go into court the next day and show a judge that you have enough evidence. With "investigation," though, you can stall a hearing off for a couple of days. And if your name is Wayne Powers, that couple of days could be enough to manufacture the evidence.

They took me downstairs, into what used to be the vault of the bank, I guess. It had been fixed into half a dozen cells, and they locked me up in one.

"Hey, could you have somebody call my wife," I said.

The turnkey was a middle-aged fat fellow with tobacco stains all over his teeth and his mouth and his chin. He looked as agreeable as a cobra.

"Sure," he said, "I'll call her. I'll send her a wire. I'll get the governor to write her a letter."

Then they left me alone in that damp, dark, dirty cell. No lights, a little window high in the wall with only the black of the sky showing up against the black of the ceiling. I sat down on the cot and smoked a cigarette and listened to the drip of water somewhere, and an occasional footstep upstairs and the irregular thud of some machine not too far away.

Thud, it would go. Then *thud-thud*. And in between the water would go, *drip, drip, drip*.

Then it came to me with a chilling, frightening, sinking twist, leaving me nauseated and shaking.

That was no machine. They were working out on Richie Sheridan upstairs. Beating him, slapping him, whipping him. With a

rubber hose perhaps, or a thick, heavy belt, or a bicycle chain. *Thud. Whack-whack-whack. Thud.*

And not a sound from him. Not a moan or a cry or a whisper. Big, blustery Lieutenant Richie Sheridan was showing them what it meant to be tough.

You can't take much of that. You can't sit there in the dark and listen to human flesh being pounded to a bloody pulp. You go nuts.

Maybe I did. Maybe I blew my top a little. I grabbed the bars and I bellowed as loud as I could. I shook the rickety door and yelled.

"Cut that out!" I bawled. "You yellow-bellied, cowardly pigs, cut it out! Come on down here and fight! You yellow—"

They turned the fire hose on me. I don't know where they got it or when. All I remember is yelling and shaking the bars, and then the stream of water was hitting me, filling my lungs, knocking my grip loose, throwing me back clear across the cell, leaving me gasping and shaking and choking and struggling to my feet and running to the bars again and gibbering at them, and then the water was hitting me again with all the force of a ram.

Somewhere in my mad rushes I tripped, and my head struck the leg of the cot and a blackness blacker than the black of the cell flooded over me. Water poured into my mouth and my nose and my lungs, and stars swooped through the window and exploded in a flash of white, white light.

Chapter V

WHEN I came to, I was lying on the cot and daylight had filled the vault. The turnkey was shaking me.

"Come on, buddy," he was saying. "Come on. You been sprung."

Sprung? For a moment I didn't know what he meant. I didn't know where I was. Then with the realization of the dampness of my soaked clothes, everything came back.

I got to my feet, my whole head throbbing. "Come on, buddy," the turnkey said again.

In his hand he held a night-stick, a hard, short wooden club, and he was ready to use

it. Cold and wet, my head a dull hollow, water squishing with each step, I followed him upstairs.

A county man I'd never seen before, the day man, I guess, was sitting behind the desk in a swivel chair. Over his shoulder I could look into the radio room. The same frowsy babe was there at the mike.

The cop shoved my gun, my badge, my money, my car keys across the desk.

"Here's your stuff," he said. "We got orders to let you go. Your car's parked out in front."

I slipped the gun and keys into my crinkled, stuck-together pockets, pinned on the badge, and I counted the money.

"Where's my partner?" I asked.

"What partner?" He opened the big arrest book, about the size of one of those heavy dictionaries. "Your name's Kane, isn't it? William Kane?"

He turned the book around and his dirty fingernail pointed to my name.

"Kane, William," it read, and it gave my address. "Arrested 11:15 p.m., investigation."

Above my name on that page were a lot of monickers I'd never heard of before. Below it was nothing but empty white lines.

Richie Sheridan wasn't listed. They hadn't booked him at all. They were holding him somewhere, where they could go on beating him and beating him.

"Buddy," I said, "if—"

The apple-cheeked, pretty-faced country cop grinned at me. "Are you trying to be tough, Kane?" he asked.

I put my right hand on the desk, palm down. "Just tell that sergeant of yours, buddy," I said. "Tell him he's got two hours to let Sheridan go or I'm coming after him."

He laughed. "That," he said, "is funny. Did you ever see a wet dog put his tail between his legs and run? That's you. You're a wet cur now, sopping wet. Put your tail between your legs and run."

I'd been bringing up my left. It caught him as the last word came out. Because I was leaning over the desk, I didn't get him flush in the mouth, but the swivel chair went spinning around like a top, and when it brought him back I was across the desk

planting my right on that soft, weak chin.

That stopped the spinning, all right. The chair rocked back and forth and the country cop slumped slowly out of it to the floor and sat there, his head on one side.

The babe in the radio room was watching me. But she didn't say a word; she didn't grab for her mike. She just watched me rub my fist and turn around and walk out of that station leaving a trail of water behind me.

I wasn't running. My tail wasn't between my legs.

But I was in a hurry. A block away I found a phone booth in a drug store and called my own station while the soda jerk stared at my sopping, dripping clothes and my bloodshot eyes.

Ed Noren was the desk sergeant. He answered.

"Ed, this is Kane," I said. "Get—"

"Where the hell you been!" he yelled. "Your wife's called every ten minutes all morning. The lieutenant's missing, too, the captain's blowing his top; everything's popping!"

"Listen, Ed, get hold of a lawyer quick. A good one. The county boys are holding Richie Sheridan somewhere and we've got to spring him before they beat him silly."

"For God's sake, what's been going on?"

I SAID, "I'm coming in. I'll tell you when I get there. But find that lawyer in a hurry. And listen, Ed, call my wife, too, will you? Tell her I'm all right?"

"I'll get the lawyer," Ed told me. "But you'd better take five minutes and talk to Marie yourself. She's plenty worried. And here's something else. According to the lieutenant's report, you're looking for Zabor-sky, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the Coast Guard found him last night. Floating in the lake south of here."

"Full of lead?"

"Yeah, sure," Noren said. "What did you expect?"

That was a hectic five-minute phone call to Marie, and it was even worse after I reached the station, when I had to give the story to Captain Martin Souder.

I told it slowly, point by point, so he could

get it all.

Here's the way it went:

The lieutenant gets a tip. What's in that tip, who he gets it from, I don't know. But he tells me that Zaborsky is back, at the Bronze Lantern, and he must be right because Zaborsky is back all right.

So we go buzzing out there, where we don't belong, and what do we find? Richie's wife doing a strip act.

Well, you can add that up yourself. Why did Richie want to go out there? What was he so hot about? Zaborsky? Nuts. It was the woman. He must have known he'd see her. The tip must have mentioned her as well as Zaborsky, and that was what put him on the trail.

Anyway, we get the bum's rush out of the joint. But Richie's persistent; he has to go back the next day. And while we're there somebody plugs the dame. Practically in Richie's arms he plugs her—for a nice, big, juicy murder charge. Or a nice, big, juicy frame. Was the whole thing a plant?

"Let's find out," the captain said. "Take Noren with you and track down that tip the lieutenant got. I'll see if I can put on some pressure downtown."

While the captain headed for the state's attorney's office, I showered and put on some dry clothes. Then Noren and I burned up a lot of rubber to that crummy joint on South State.

The joint was open, but almost empty. One old man at a table near the bar, his head slumped on his arms, might have been there a week. A couple more were at the bar. And the bartender.

He was the crummiest specimen in the whole crummy place. A fat fellow with a big belly, wearing a grease-smeared, filthy apron he couldn't have changed for a year, and his shirt was just as bad. His eyes were tiny and bleary; he needed a shave; he'd slobbered all over his collar and it was wrinkled and faded and dirty.

Behind the bar he sidled up to us and eyed us warily, just standing there, not saying a word.

Noren flipped the tin at him, and asked, "What kind of a deal you trying to pull? What's the big idea?"

The bartender's bleary eyes swiveled around at the customers and he didn't answer.

"Listen," Ed said, "you're in a jam, Mac. A cop was here the other night and you gave him a bum steer. You pulled a phony on him." He repeated, "What's the big idea?"

In a voice that went with his rheumy eyes, the fat fellow wheezed, "I never gave nobody a bum steer. You got me wrong, Officer."

I said, "It was Richie Sheridan. Remember?"

"Richie Sheridan? I never—"

Noren pulled his gun out and laid it on the bar.

"Yeah," the bartender said, quick-like. "Yeah, I seen him. But I didn't give him no bum steer."

"Who did then?"

"I dunno. Honest, Officer, I dunno. I was busy."

Ed picked up the gun and whirled the cylinder.

"He didn't talk to nobody, Officer. Honest, he made a couple phone calls, that's all."

"Mac," Ed said, "you got any insurance?"

NERVOUSLY, the fat fellow licked his lips.

"You married?" Ed asked.

"Yeah, I'm married."

"Got any kids?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got kids. Three."

Ed put the gun back in his holster. "Mac," he said, "I sure hope you're not lying to me."

"I ain't lying, Officer. Honest, I ain't lying."

Well, maybe he was, maybe not. I'd lost interest. I was staring at the pay phone on the opposite wall. A dial telephone.

A man like this fat bartender, you could squeeze the truth out of him. You could frighten it out of him or beat it out or choke it out. But what can you do to a dial telephone? Kick it, wham it around, squeeze it till the big, black coin box breaks, and still that telephone can't tell you what number a cop called two nights before.

I walked over to it and took the receiver off the hook. There was one chance in a mil-

lion that maybe some supervising operator had monitored the call, or maybe something had gone wrong and it had had to be recorded. One chance in a million.

I'd been about to call the station, to have an official inquiry put to the telephone company, when I swung around on Ed.

"Ed!" I yelled. "You stoop! Did you get a call from Richie night before last?"

Slowly he said, "Night before last? By golly, you're right, Bill, I did!"

"What about?"

"I dunno—wait a minute, wait a minute!" He went through his pockets, dumping keys and papers and pencil and pen and toothpicks and wallet on the bar. "Some fellow phoned in for him and left a message just before he called and I passed it on. Wait now!"

He didn't have it with him.

"It must be in my desk," he said. "It's got to be in there. Some fellow—"

This time I did dial the station and Johnny Yancey answered.

"Johnny," I said, "in Noren's desk. A note about a call Sheridan got."

"The desk's locked," Johnny told me.

"The desk's locked," I told Ed.

"What's the matter with him?" Ed yelled. "Can't he bust it open?"

He could. And he found it.

* Sheridan, Call Randolph 5-7336.
Ask for Room 612.

"Spot it for us, Johnny," I said.

He did, in a hurry. The Sentinel Hotel.

Chapter VI

IN THE near North Side, the Sentinel wasn't far away. It is what they call a theatrical hotel, which means it's one step above a joint. Noren and I slammed over there and talked to the greasy-looking, slimy young man behind the desk.

"Who's in Room Six-twelve?" I asked him.

"I'll have to look it up, sir," the clerk said. "Just a minute." He turned to go into the cubby-hole of an office behind him.

Ed reached out, grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around. "You look it up right here," he said, tapping his forehead. "Right

at this desk. And stay away from the house phone."

"It's Janssen, Larry Janssen," the clerk admitted grudgingly. "Registered from Los Angeles. I think he's in."

We hit the door to Room 612 just once with our shoulders and it flew open, and there was a thin fellow in this thirties, wearing slacks, open-necked shirt, the usual Hollywood clothes. And he had a face lined and bloated from night after night with the bottle. The night before had been no exception. He was stretched out on the bed sleeping it off.

Ed and I shook him awake, threw some water in his face, walked him around the room a couple times, then sat him down again on the bed.

"Cops?" he asked.

Noren said, "That's right. And we got a little story to tell you."

He leaned forward and stared right into Janssen's face. When you look into Ed Noren's ugly phizz, with that short, squat body and bull neck and wide shoulders behind it, you pay attention.

"It's about a wise boy from Hollywood," Ed went on, "who pulled into town here and tried to work a deal, and got a cop in a jam."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Janssen said. He got up from the side of the bed and Ed slammed him down again.

"Lemme finish my story, wise boy," he said. "You know what charge we threw against that fellow? None. None at all. We took him around in the alley behind the station, that's what we did, and we let the corner figure out a charge—now what's the tie-in between you and this Maude Muller dame? Straight."

Janssen said, "I never heard of Maude Muller."

He was going to hang tough, apparently. So we shook him down first, and I found the answer in his wallet. Larry Janssen, a card said. Talent. He was a booking agent.

"You're from Chicago originally, aren't you, Janssen?" I asked.

"Who, me?" he said. Then, when Ed grabbed him by the collar, "All right, so what if I am?"

"So this," I told him. "You knew Maude Muller when she was Mrs. Richie Sheridan. You talked her into running off to Hollywood with you and when you couldn't get her a job in the movies you made her into a cheap strip dancer."

"That's a lie!" he said. "It was Zaborsky!"

"Zaborsky what?"

"Zaborsky made her into a stripper, not me. I was in love with that girl, sure. I'll admit it. I'm still nuts about her! But in Hollywood she met this racketeer, this gambler, and she walked out on me. She left me flat. And she couldn't dance and she couldn't sing, so she talked Zaborsky into giving her a strip number in his night club back here under that phony name."

"So," I said, "you followed her here. You thought maybe she'd go back to you if Zaborsky was in the jug, so you tipped off Richie Sheridan, her husband. You knew who Richie was all along. You also told Richie who Maude Muller was, so he'd be sure to make the pinch."

Janssen was staring at a spot on the knee of Noren's uniform. "Yes," he said, "I did. So what? He should be in jail, Zaborsky should."

"And then," I went on, "you saw it wouldn't do any good, that we couldn't find Zaborsky. So you quarreled with her and you put a slug in her, a twenty-two caliber slug. That's a small gun, Janssen. Only women and booking agents use one that small."

THEN I stopped. Because Janssen was on his feet. His whisky-red face had gone gin-white. He was trembling.

"Somebody shot her!" he cried. "No! You're not saying that just to—" He grabbed Ed by the arms, pleading with him. "She isn't dead!"

Noren shoved him away. "Cut, bud!" he snapped. "This ain't Hollywood!"

Janssen covered his face with shaking hands, and after a moment he looked at me and said, "Is she dead?"

"I suppose you didn't know!" Ed yelled. "I suppose you weren't even there last night!"

"You're lying to me."

"Look, Janssen," I told him, "just for the record you're in a bad spot. If you've got an alibi, spill it."

He laughed, a short, bitter laugh. "An alibi? Do I need an alibi? All right, I'll give you one. I was drunk. She knew I'd called her husband and she told me we were through. Night before last that was. So I got drunk again. I was in your police station on Chicago Avenue until three o'clock this morning, then I got drunk once more."

In the tank!

"It must have been Zaborsky," he said. "She was falling for that county officer's play. Zaborsky didn't like it."

"Zaborsky?" I said. "He wouldn't be jealous. With his cash he could get twenty babes a day."

Janssen shook his head. "Not like her. No, sir. Once you'd known her you couldn't let her go."

I guess he was right. Richie, too.

We took him in anyway and called Chicago Avenue and sure enough he'd been in the tank. We called the coroner's office and got the autopsy report on Zaborsky. Two days he'd been dead when they fished him out.

So it couldn't have been Janssen. It couldn't have been Zaborsky. Who had it been?

Ed and I went back to the station and, like scared dogs with our tails between our legs, we sat there and thought about it. The boys came in one by one, and I told each of them, trying to figure it out in my own mind as I did. Johnny Yancey was there with his shoulder still in a sling. Yost, the day lieutenant. Stan Lomsky and Bill Shureen and Arch Novak and Joe Smith and Ed and I. All of us.

And it was plain what everybody was thinking.

So Richie Sheridan's in a jam. Lieutenant Sheridan, who likes to push them around, is getting pushed around himself. The big slob, the tough slugger is on the spot. My, ain't that too bad. My heart bleeds for him.

They just sat there, and while they stared at me, I got three telephone calls.

The first was from the captain, with more bad news. The state's attorney was out of

town; the first assistant state's attorney didn't know anything about it; the sheriff was sure if his men had made an arrest they were entirely justified.

Next, Ed Noren's lawyer reported. He'd applied for a writ, but the judge didn't want to grant it without having Sergeant Powers in court, and a bailiff was out looking for him. A lot of help that was. He could take two days to serve it, two vital days, two brutal days.

The third call was from a woman.

"Officer Kane?" she asked, soft and low, as if she didn't want anyone to overhear her.

I said, "Yeah. Who is this?"

"This is Sally. You've got to stop them, Kane! You've got to! They're going to shoot him and say he was trying to escape! You've got to!"

"Wait a minute!" I cried. I was clutching the receiver so tight my fingers ached. "They can't do that! It's murder!"

"They're going to! I heard them!"

"Where are you?" I cried.

She didn't answer and dimly in the background I heard a faint, scratchy voice saying, "Eighteen—eighteen—"

Then I didn't hear a thing. She'd hung up.

WHEN I turned around, Stan Lomsky had smashed open the door to the captain's closet. The captain's closet—that's what we call the locker where the heavy weapons are kept, the riot guns, the sub-machine-guns, the gas grenades, the rifles.

He had it open, Lomsky did, and he was handing the weapons out to the other fellows, and nobody was saying a word.

"What are you going?" I yelled.

Nobody answered me.

"Have you gone nuts?" I cried.

"Look," Lomsky said, "I hate his guts, see? He's a heel if there ever was one. But I'm not going to sit around any longer. We're going after him."

"Going after him?"

Stan said, "Yeah, we're going after him. What's the matter, Kane? Afraid?"

That was what Richie Sheridan had said to me, not long before. But that was different. We were cops. We couldn't take the

law into our own hands.

"Don't be fools!" I said.

With the guns they moved toward the door, opening the breeches, spinning the cylinders, seeing that everything was in working order. Then they walked out on me.

But they left a riot gun behind in that closet and I grabbed it and a box of shells and ran after them and caught them before they got out of the building.

"What're you waiting for?" I yelled. "Let's go!"

And we went, straight toward the Spotswood station. Lomsky and Yost and Shureen and Novak and Joe Smith and I, in two cars, with Johnny Yancey staying behind in case anything else came along. His shooting arm was banged up, anyway.

Armed to the teeth. Out to raid a police station. With no legal standing whatsoever, far from our own jurisdiction, bucking the duly constituted forces of law and order.

Outlaws, that's what we were, every one of us.

Sirens down, we didn't need long to reach Spotswood, and a block from the police station we stopped to make our plans. In a tight spot like that, Stan Lomsky usually takes over. He sent Yost and Shureen around to the back. Novak and Smith took the building on the right, up on the roof. And Stan and Noren and I stayed in front.

"I'll go in," I said.

With the riot gun cradled under my arm, I walked alone across that deserted street in the lonely little suburb, right into their guns perhaps.

But they didn't shoot. Not a sound came from the station and I stalked past the solitary squad car parked in front and up the stone steps and into the lobby, and right up to my old pal. The boy on the swivel chair.

He didn't make a move. That riot gun was too handy.

"Okay," I said. "Get the turnkey up here and then back against the wall."

For an instant he didn't move, but when I waved the muzzle of the gun just a bit he pressed a buzzer on his desk and got warily to his feet.

"You nuts?" he asked in a dry, nervous voice.

I said, "Yeah, sure."

The babe from the radio room poked her head out and I motioned her against the wall, too. Then I turned so I could watch the stairway to the vault.

The turnkey came up, and Lomsky strode in about the same time, the way we'd timed it. Stan lined them up, and I went downstairs and plowed through the cells.

A sallow-faced kid, trying to roll a cigarette, was in the first one. No one else was in the cell block—not a soul. And not a sign of Richie.

Upstairs again, I lighted a cigarette and glared at the three people against the wall. Where was he? How could we find out? The county police have half a dozen stations, some of them fifty miles from Spotswood. He might be in any of them, he might be anywhere else.

Sergeant Wayne Powers told me. While I was standing there wondering what to do, his voice came over the speaker in the radio room, booming and impatient.

"Car Eighteen," he said. "Eighteen. Come in."

I grinned and the radio operator bit her lip.

"Car Eighteen," another voice answered.

"Well, let's go," Powers said. "Where are you?"

"Burnham. Half a mile away."

"Hurry, it up," snapped Powers. "We're waiting!" Then the radio was quiet again.

I pointed the muzzle of my gun at the woman.

"Okay, Sally," I told her. "Maybe you'd better come with us."

She didn't protest.

Chapter VII

HEAD down, Sally walked out of the station, while the turnkey and the other county officer watched her.

"Where's the keys to the car outside?" I asked.

The officer tossed them onto his desk. I pocketed them, and Lomsky and I walked out backward, cautiously.

But they didn't make a break. They let us reassemble and get into the cars—four

of them now, counting the county machine I took—and drive off.

To the Bronze Lantern, of course. Half a mile from Burnham just as Car Eighteen had said. Where else?

We'd gone a mile when the radio spluttered again. "Car Twenty," a voice said, the voice of my weak-chinned friend back in Spotswood. "Car Twenty. Sergeant Powers, come in."

Powers answered and my friend said, "Kane and a dozen city cops are heading your way, Sergeant. They just left here."

The FCC should have heard Powers's answer.

"They've got Sally," said my friend. "They took her along."

"All right, all right!" Powers cried. "Car Eighteen, did you hear that? Hurry up!"

Beside me, the woman radio operator said, "You've got to stop him!"

"You're his wife, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, I am!" Her voice was vehement, as if she were trying to defend him. "I don't know what's got into him. He's not himself. He's never been like this before!"

They all say that, sister.

Even with sirens screaming, and accelerators all the way down, it still took us fifteen minutes to reach the Bronze Lantern. We spread out like Patton's tanks, a car in the rear, a car in front, a car to the east and Lomsky, Sally and I in the parking-lot to the west, next to the empty Car Eighteen.

Stan cupped his hands to his mouth and walked toward the joint, in the open.

"Powers!" he bellowed. "Send our man out here or we're coming in to get him!"

A rifle cracked from the Bronze Lantern and Stan ducked behind a tree.

So they were shooting. A showdown. A battle, cop against cop. And we had to go ahead with it. We couldn't back down now.

I checked the safety on my shotgun and sprinted up to a tree at the edge of the parking lot, across from Lomsky.

And then, faint in the distance but growing louder and louder, we heard another siren. Another police car. Anybody can tell who has listened to them enough. A police siren is different from one on a fire truck or

an ambulance.

We waited until that siren was shrieking in our ears, until it made a screaming turn off the black-top and pulled up on the side of the night club, right in the open, right between us and whoever had that rifle inside the Bronze Lantern.

It was Souder—Captain Martin Souder, all alone. His uniform was wrinkled, his hat was missing, his thin gray hair was awry, his puffy face was red with anger.

Out of the car he got and stepped in front of it, where everyone could see him, where anyone could get a clear shot at him.

"Hold your fire!" he bellowed.

When Captain Souder bellows, he bellows. The Bronze Lantern rattled with the echo of his powerful voice.

"Hold your fire! The first one of my men who shoots is suspended!"

Like a gale that's dying out, the roar of his words died away. No one spoke and no one moved. And no one fired.

"Kane!" he yelled.

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Come out here, you fool!"

I walked out, gun ready, my eyes on that second floor. The least sound from up there, the least movement, and I'd hit the deck first and shoot second.

"Powers!" the captain roared. "Wayne Powers!"

The answer came from the ground floor of the night club—not from that second floor where somebody was shooting from the window. So it wasn't the county cops shooting! It was night club hoodlums.

"You come out here, too, Powers!" bellowed the captain.

SERGEANT WAYNE POWERS came out, striding toward us angrily, his head high, his cheeks flushed. A country boy who'd met his boss. A man isn't made captain of police just because he's been around a long time.

Then, before I knew it, before I could stop her, Sally, ran past me to get to her husband's side, to help him, to protect—hell, why *does* a wife run to her husband's side when he's in trouble?

And the gunman up on the second floor of

the Bronze Lantern cut loose. With a machine-gun this time, not a rifle. Powers hit the ground and the bullets swung toward the captain. You could hear them *rat-tat-tat* off his car. The captain went down, and then the woman, and then the bullets sprayed toward me. I was in the mud by then, facing the building, hugging that mud and letting loose with the riot gun.

A boy like Lomsky, he isn't going to stay out of anything like that. He let loose toward that second floor window, too, once, twice—those guns hold two shells. And Bill Shureen came up out of nowhere, directly below the window where that machine-gun was, and lobbed a grenade into it. We heard it go off, and saw the white cloud of tear gas billowing out of the shattered window.

Then we were running toward those who were down.

That machine-gunner up there had missed Powers and me. The captain had a hole in his leg below the knee, a bad wound, but he'd get over it. And Sally was done for. Two slugs, right in the middle.

She tried to sit up and Powers was beside her, pillowing her head in his arms.

"Sally!" he pleaded. "Sally!"

She looked at him and, with the blood gushing out of her mouth, she said, "I'm sorry, Wayne, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" he cried. "It's my fault, Sally, it's my fault!"

But she shook her head weakly, again and again, as if she couldn't stop.

"No, it isn't, Wayne," she whispered. "It's mine. I was jealous. I went to see her." Her head moved slower and slower. "When you told those two city officers not to go back I knew why. I knew you were after her. When I went to see her I asked her to leave you alone. She laughed at me. I snatched up a pistol that was on her table and shot her. I'm sorry, Wayne."

"That's all right, Sally, don't worry." He looked at us and said, "And I thought it was Sheridan. All along I've been sure it was Sheridan. But it doesn't matter now. Sally, don't you worry. You're going to be all right."

Her head sank slowly onto her chest and her eyes closed.

"For God's sake!" he roared. "Get her to a hospital! Somebody get her to a doctor! Hurry!"

It wasn't any use, but we did the best we could. We tried to stop the bleeding and covered her, and got a stretcher while Shuren worked over the captain's leg.

And while we were working Wayne Powers walked away. As he reached the front steps of the Bronze Lantern I ran after him, because I had seen the look in his eyes.

Right in he went and up the stairs leading to the gambling rooms. Halfway up, the door at the top opened and there, machine-gun in one hand, tears streaming from his eyes, pawing at them with his free hand, gasping for breath stood the skeleton—Additis.

Powers shot him. Once in the forehead, once in the mouth, once in the belly. Then he turned around and handed his gun to me.

Well, he wasn't a good cop. He'd been getting his ice from Additis all along. He'd looked the other way when Zaborsky was killed, although he'd probably known that Additis and his head waiter, Bednar, had done it, not wanting to give back the gravy they'd collected while Zaborsky was gone. Crazy mad with jealousy, he'd planned to kill Richie, too, because he'd been sure Richie had shot the babe.

But I couldn't blame him for plugging Additis, the man who'd killed Sally in a needless, desperate attempt to get rid of everyone who might connect him with the Zaborsky killing.

ANYWAY, that was the end of the Bronze Lantern. The end of Additis. The end of a police career for Wayne Powers.

They had Richie Sheridan in the kitchen, his hands tied behind him, his bare back red and raw, his eyes blackened, his fingers bleeding and blistered. But his eyes were still wide open and glaring at us.

We untied him and told him what had happened. He pushed us aside and strode off through the house, beaten, but still big and still tough. They were loading Powers into a squad car when he got outside. For an instant they faced each other.

And this, we thought, would be Richie Sheridan at his worst, taking out his vengeance and his hatred in a blaze of brutality on a handcuffed man.

"Go ahead," Powers said. "Slug me. They're both dead. I don't give a damn."

Richie Sheridan answered him, in a soft voice we didn't know. "Yeah," he said, "they're dead now. I won't slug you, Powers. You'll get yours from a jury."

It was the end, too, of big, tough Lieutenant Richie Sheridan who'd taken it out too much already, on too many people. When he got out of the hospital and Powers's trial was over—the sergeant copped a plea on taking bribes—Richie resigned from the Department. He's driving a laundry truck now and I see him once in a while on my rounds. A big fellow, husky, with scarred fingers. Gentle and easy-going and soft-spoken and a pretty fair salesman. You'd never recognize him. ● ● ●

Long Arm of the Law

by
Jack
Benton

- A man was arrested in Great Falls, Mont., for using the second-story girder of a building under construction for a bed.
- A couple was haled into court in Naples, Italy, for kissing "too passionately long" in a movie theater.
- A man was seized by police in Monticello, N. Y., for beating his wife over the head with a pork roast.
- A 63-year-old Muskegon, Mich., lady was taken before the judge for knocking a policeman's cap off with a snowball.



"I'm going to kill you!"

SUCCESS STORY

By FRANK D. MILLMAN

I WAS FEELING low down blue, trying to decide whether to leave town or face it, when the phone rang and I heard Joe Paley's voice for the first time in five long, bitter and guilt-filled years.

"Hello, Phil," he said softly, straining for casualness. "It's been a long time, eh? Listen, I got a deal cooking. Some wholesaler from Florida whom I've contacted wants to buy a trainload of your goods. Good business for you and a fat commission for me.

He was in a wonderful spot. He could not only afford to play Joe's little game—he could afford to lose!

Want to come over and discuss it? Strictly business."

"Yeah, sure. Certainly, Joe. Glad to hear from you again. Always interested in extra business. Just as soon see you get the commission as one of my salesmen. Where you living now?"

I played along. Sure no one was ever too rich to pass up extra business, and Joe could use a commission—or even a spare buck—a hell of a lot more than I needed sales. But there wasn't any wholesaler from Florida. He lied in his teeth. Maybe we both knew it.

"Thirty-four-sixty Appleton Road. It's an old cabin. I'm just staying there for a rest," he apologized. "But when this came along before I could move back to town, I figured I'd better grab it while I could."

He wasn't staying there for a rest. He'd had nothing but a vacation—from making money—for a long time. He was broke and the shack was better than the city's lodging house for homeless men.

"Okay, Joe. I'll be right over. Hope this works out—for both of us." My hand reached into the drawer of my wife's dresser for the .32 automatic I'd placed there earlier in the evening. I knew what Joe had in mind. There were a couple of bullets left in the gun and I might need it before the night was over. The naive obviousness of the plan Joe was attempting, astounded me. When you're desperate, logic goes out the window. Joe wasn't thinking rationally, he was just brooding murder. Hell with the gun, I thought. It won't make an iota of difference to me, anyway. I left it in the drawer and stepped out to my car.

It took my high powered coupe thirty-five minutes to reach Joe's "home." His place was a wooden shack that had once been an idyllic bungalow retreat for a couple who liked to relax away from the city under the illusion that they were roughing it. For Joe, it was no illusion. There wasn't much paint left on the boards, and the cheap green shades covered a few broken window panes. One light burned inside. It was a tiny ramshackle affair but Joe didn't have much choice in the matter.

I stepped to the door and hesitated. Joe must be near the breaking point to try it this

way, I thought. Well, it didn't matter that much to me. I'd give him his moment. He'd earned it.

MY KNOCK was answered by a tall, lanky man in his late thirties with the worried, trouble lines of a much older person. His eyes were red-rimmed but still had the faintest remnant of the bright charming sparkle they'd once held. There were dark pockets of flesh below his eyes. He needed a shave. The stubble was thick on his gaunt face. He hadn't gone to even that much trouble. His shirt was wrinkled and food-stained. His collar was open, sleeves rolled up and a faded gray tie dangled below the unbuttoned collar.

"Come in, Phil. Glad you could come. Sit down while I bring out some papers I want to show you."

There was a rickety table and chair in the room and an old horsehide couch in the far corner with sagging springs and straw peeking out of the bottom. In the back of the room I could see a tiny bedroom with the steel post of a cot. In one corner of the room we were in was what served for a kitchenette: a sink and a waist-high refrigerator with an electric plate perched on it. It wasn't much of a home for a guy who'd been as bright as they ever come back in our college days.

Joe and I had once been buddies. We'd met in school and developed a great friendship. We'd kept up a friendly but intense competition for marks, honors and school jobs. I had more contacts and got the important jobs on the campus. He always got the edge in marks and scholastic honors. After graduation, things changed. My increasing success and his constant failures in everything he tried, had put some strain on our relationship.

How he finally got stuck in selling never failed to puzzle me. He could not have chosen, more deliberately, an occupation for which he was less suited. He began to develop an envy of my successes but was too much of a gentleman in those days, ever to express it. Besides, we still had much in common and used to have great talks and walks together when one of us would occa-

sionally drop over to the other's apartment. I had always admired his brilliant mind.

Then I got that job with the Thompkins Company and started courting Marie, Mr. Thompkins's daughter. Joe was selling on commission for Thompkins along with three or four other firms. He was madly in love with Marie and stood pretty well with her, if not with the old man, until I came along.

I took Marie away from him. I married her. Nothing nasty or personal intended. I wish I could have left her alone for Joe's sake, but she was my key to Thompkins's business and when her father died a couple of years ago I inherited the whole works. Naturally, he was pretty hard hit by it, but what really made him bitter and never took the hate out of him was the knowledge that I could hardly bear anything about Marie except her money. Joe was never quite the same afterwards. We hadn't spoken to each other since it happened.

Hell, if it wasn't for the money he could have had her. Fact is, Marie had been a brutal nag and a foul-tasting medicine over the years. But, she had been my open sesame to success and all's fair in love and business.

JOE HAD gone into his bedroom to get the "papers." He came back with a torn leather brief case with an ugly bulge in it. The bulge wasn't contracts and business papers. It was a gun.

He pulled the wooden chair up in front of the couch where I sat, placed the brief case on his lap and studied me.

I deliberately let myself go, relaxed and loosened my muscles, slumping in the lumpy, uncomfortable couch.

"You could have shaved, put on a clean shirt and made it look good—at least, at first," I said.

He rubbed his jaw as if he had never thought of it till now, his fingers examining the thick beard. "What do you mean?" He was keeping up the pretense.

"I mean there isn't any Florida wholesaler. There isn't any big deal with a fat commission in it for you. You probably haven't been out of this hole in weeks—except to grub a meal."

His face colored angrily. Then it resumed

the effort at a cold, calm demeanor.

"Why do you say that, Phil? I wouldn't call you here for nothing. Not after all these years. Not after we hadn't spoken to each other in five years. I needed to have you here today, Phil. Needed you here—bad!"

"I know, Joe. I know why you called me and what you figure on doing. Go ahead. Take your time. I won't spoil your big scene. You've got a cooperative boy here tonight. Tell me your trouble, cry a little and then be violent. Though getting nasty hardly becomes you, Joe. I never placed you as that type."

His hand reached slowly, almost politely—as if he didn't wish the motion to disturb me—into his bag.

"You're a shrewd one, Phil. So you know. Well, why did you come then? Don't think you're going to change my mind, do you?"

"Well, I was always pretty good in a debate. I remember Professor . . . what was his name . . . Walcott, I think . . . used to say I could handle fallacious logic like a marksman with a rifle." I lashed the last words at him and by the way his mouth tightened I knew I was right and he was out of his head. Crazy jealous. Crazy with envy. Chopped up inside over losing his girl to the wrongest guy in the world for Marie.

Funny thing was, I still liked him. He'd been my best friend; a real nice guy back in those college days. I wondered, a little wistfully, if anyone from those times ever thought that about me. It would have been nice to know they did.

"A glib tongue's not going to help you much tonight," he said. He didn't say it mad. There was a matter-of-fact dryness and evenness to his voice. A little tired and empty, maybe, but no hate left in it. There was probably only the memory and scar of hate left in him. You've got to be quite a bit alive to hate actively. But the vague memory of hate still stirring in an empty shell—even a near-corpses can have that.

He had his gun out now. It rested on his left elbow, idling in his right hand. It wasn't pointing at me but was ready like a mountain lion before it leaps.

"Go to it, Joe," I said. "But what'll it get you? Marie? Success? My business?"

His answer was low and strained. "No. It's too late for that. I wouldn't want anything but Marie, anyway. It's too late for that, too. Do you want to know why I really called you down here tonight?"

"I guess that's obvious," I said.

"That's only part of the story." He glanced at the gun, self-consciously, like a man on the subway suddenly discovering that he is wearing two differently colored socks.

"About an hour before I called you, Phil, I'd made up my mind to kill myself."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I smiled. "But under the circumstances, you'll forgive me for being very sorry to hear you changed your mind."

"You're okay, Phil." A grudging look of admiration entered his gray-blue eyes. "You're a heel, Phil, but you've got guts."

"It's easy to look as if you've got guts when there aren't any left in you," I said.

HE IGNORED that. "As I was saying, I was about to kill myself, when I started thinking about Marie, and how miserable she has been with you, and what a louse you turned out to be. Everyone in town knows about your philandering and how you've broken her heart. Suicide would end my problems but Marie would still be stuck with you. I remembered what I used to say at college in the old days about taking one's life. Remember, Phil?"

"Oh, yeah. Now I get it. 'Why should anyone ever commit suicide if they could just as easily use such a moment of desperation to do something worthwhile before they die?'"

"Good memory," he complimented me. "That's why I called you here tonight. That's why I'm going to kill you before I take my own life."

"You used to have a fine mind, Joe," I said. "But this isn't very subtle. Don't you think I know you? Don't you think I figured on this? Don't you think I could see through that phony story?"

"Then why did you come?"

He threw up his left hand to cut off my reply before I could open my mouth. "Never mind," he said. "It doesn't matter why you came, or what you thought you might be able

to do. You know why I called you here. Whatever you figured on—I'm going to kill you. We don't matter. Your life is worthless and I lost mine five years ago. At least, Marie will have a chance for a little happiness."

"You're wrong, Joe. But I'm not arguing."

His nerves must have been dancing under his skin and bones all the time we talked. He'd kept it under control, but it broke through now. He stood up, lifted the gun, pointing it at me. His body was trembling.

"Damn you," he said. "You're just putting on an act. Phil Brade, Man of Steel. No nerves, icicles for blood. You don't fool me. You're scared and you're looking for some way out. This fatalism and indifference is a phony act. You're not getting the chance, Phil. Marie's going to be free. We're both going for a long debate in heaven—or hell—but Marie will be free!"

His finger started to tighten on the trigger. I had been slumping like a jellyfish on the couch, but I sprang at him now like a streak of light. I couldn't let Joe do this to himself, not now. One hand slammed the gun out of his hand, the other chopped him in the belly, and my knee went up simultaneously, cracking his head backward so neatly he was out cold before he hit the floor. He'd been so weak and broken in spirit, he'd folded up like a paper accordian. I let the gun lay where it fell and started out the door.

I have to admit I'm not such a hard guy after all, because there were tears in my eyes when I stepped outside. A red haze of immense sadness shimmered before my eyes as if it came from outside, but it had all been inside. I know.

The cops were waiting for me by my car, like I knew they would. They put the handcuffs on me without a word. I got in the police car and we drove away.

Then I began crying like a baby. I was crying for Joe. I was crying for all that Joe might have been and for what he could have had with Marie if things had been different.

I was crying for everything except the chair in which I was going to burn for the murder of Marie Brade an hour before Joe called me—about the same time he was trying to commit suicide.



Herbert's voice was
frantic and broken



A Touch of Marion

By L. F. GUTTRIDGE

THE newspapers over here barely mentioned it because, after all, it was a foreign affair—and *purely* domestic. I was thankful. As it was, long after I got home there were nights when I had trouble sleeping.

I met Herbert Giles for the first time in Digpoole and you could hardly have imag-

ined a milder-looking Englishman. It was just after the war. The town had emerged unscarred, its respectability intact despite the proximity of the U.S. Army Supply Base, of which I was a member.

The night was early and sullen with the threat of thunder. I shrank from the movie houses, fled the weary laughter of young

Herbert seemed happy . . . and practically no one missed Marion!

girls on the Town-Hall steps and sought the Full Moon. There I sat, doggedly sipping warm, sticky beer.

While the landlord awaited his invasion of thirsty customers and the barmaid sprawled in her chair like a helpless turtle, I studied the man at the next table. His feet rested quietly on the rungs of the chair opposite which bore his derby hat and, neatly folded, the evening paper. His scant hair trembled in the breeze generated by a huge fan hanging from the ceiling.

He smoked a pipe. I fumbled for my own briar, tamped it and snapped my lighter. Snapped it three times. The other man proffered matches. With both pipes steaming, we beamed at each other.

"Join me," I said and woke up the barmaid.

Following two rounds of beer, Herbert Giles had developed from a mere drinking acquaintance to a friend. Pipes and tobacco ruled our conversation. I had a modest collection of meerschaums and clays back home but his, it seemed, was a proud achievement, a treasure gathered over much of his life and which commanded most of his attention.

HE ROTATED HIS GLASS slowly on the damp table and added, "Wish Marion could understand that."

This first reference to his wife cast a bleak cloud upon him. Oddly, I felt it, too, and forced a little humor to dispel it.

"You know women. They become just as obsessed with, say, hats for instance and—"

"Not Marion. She just likes to boss people. And as I'm the only one near . . ." He shrugged. "But I'm all right so long as I have my pipes. I suppose I devote more time to them than I do to her. So she hates them. She hates me."

I called for more beer and steered the talk back to tobacco. He was interested in American methods of manufacture, about which I knew little, and disclosed that he was attempting to grow it at home. This surprised me, for the soil and climate, I had assumed, were inadequate.

"Oh, it isn't easy," he conceded. "There are dozens of snags but it can be done. Not

extensively, you understand. Still, one day I might take it up seriously. And to hell with Marion."

The bar filled with perspiring men. New arrivals brought reports on the imminence of a thunderstorm, clamored for beer. All shared the common ordeal of impatient thirst. I heard only Giles. The ardor in his voice when he expressed a longing—the glow in his eyes indicated a *determination*—to open a pipe shop in Piccadilly or work a tobacco field in Virginia. And the sudden despair with which he stared at his glass, muttering, "But I'm chained to a musty bank office, an unfriendly street and Marion. Especially Marion."

We had two or three further meetings at which his wife was hardly mentioned. For one whose basic trait appeared to be a sort of hesitant amiability, Giles's sharp explosions of loathing when he *did* speak of her were all the more disturbing. And from the eagerness with which he would greet me, his consuming delight when we debated some point or other and the swift dismay when we would separate, I knew that the novelty of our different nationalities and varied viewpoints was not the chief reason he sought my company. Herbert Giles was a man needing the friendship of a man. He was lonely.

The landlord and the barmaid having delivered an oratorio on the theme of "Time, Gentlemen, *please*," we were paused one night out on the pub steps watching the lightning leap silently over the rooftops.

He said, "Jack," (after a struggle I had persuaded him to drop the 'major'), "Jack, I'd like you to see my pipes tonight. Marion doesn't approve of my bringing friends to the house." He scanned my face for a sign of contempt, and seeing none, continued, "Had pals once. She scared 'em away. But tonight she won't be home."

She had left that afternoon on a visit to her sister-in-law who lived in Dundee. The husband—Marion's brother—was in the Army. "Out east, somewhere," Herbert explained. "Anyway," he rubbed his chin briskly, "this is your chance to see my collection. While the cat's away, eh?"

His home was one of a stiff row of large Georgian dwellings, their heavy black door-

ways flanked by cracked gray pillars, windows half-opened and dark except for the scattered, pink-shaded squares of lamplit bedrooms. I had the strange feeling that the houses were waiting for something. We mounted the steps with the bated glee, careful tread, of trespassing children and crept in.

You can't expect a bare room to be anything but cold, unfriendly. The Giles living room, on the other hand, was over-furnished, the carpet furrily thick, the wallpaper a colorful horror of formless flowers. A massive aspidistra all but obscured the window. The room suffocated.

"Like it?" Herbert made no attempt to conceal the irony. My answering grunt could have meant anything.

"Marion," he said.

I understood. The room was of her, hostile to strangers, oppressive to its captive. He caught my puzzled glance at three pictures with their backs to the front and chuckled.

"I did that. Tried to purge the house of her while she's away." He gestured. "*That* helps. If you want to spoil your sleep, take a look. But turn 'em to the wall again, will you?"

IF ONLY for aesthetic reasons, Herbert's action was justified. Mrs. Giles's stuffy studio portrait was a masterpiece of middle-class ugliness. Once, she might have been a handsome woman. But the mouth had narrowed, tightened, the eyes had snared a cruel glint and any beauty had long fled.

I felt a pang of pity for the man. Unpretentious, and, despite his dreams, probably unsuited for anything other than the swivel chair and drab office, he hardly deserved *this*. Even the war, he told me once, had provided no escape. Unknown to her he had made several attempts to enlist until it was impressed on him that his age—"a shade too advanced"—and what one medico described as "an unreliable bladder" were to deprive the country of his services for the duration.

He led me down to the basement. We crossed to an oaken closet, fully seven feet tall. He unlocked it, threw open the doors and within, two shaded blue lights snapped

on immediately. He grinned at my admiration.

These pipes, I knew, were no mere collector's items but friends who gave mute solace when Marion's gibes became unendurable. However, any collector, tyro or connoisseur, would have appraised Herbert's small museum solely on the quality of its contents. That it was a source of spiritual relief seemed hardly relevant. Here was purely a dream collection exquisitely set against a black velvet drape, each item captioned with date and place of origin.

Two walrus-ivory pipes from Siberia flanked a crimson pottery Ashanti bowl fashioned as a crocodile's head. An eighteenth century Dutch clay with a sixteen inch stem was encircled by delicate French porcelains and rich brown meerschaums. A high-breasted amber nude, bowl flaring from between her shoulder-blades, stared haughtily at a pair of Bali fetish pipes. An assortment of briars, meerschaums, bamboos and clays surrounded a squat, tiny-bowled opium. This, Herbert took from its bracket.

"This was made," he presented it for my inspection, "from the thigh-bone of an infant. Probably by Chinese tribesmen. Seventeenth century. Fascinating, don't you think?"

Later he showed me the large box of prepared soil in which he had planted his tobacco seeds. "When they reach a fair height, I'll transplant them in the back garden."

For me, it was a pleasant evening, spent in idle chitchat, much smoking and the slow demolition of a bottle of passable sherry which he had surprised me by producing. I had considered him strictly a beer man.

To my friend, this night brought a wondrous peace of mind such as he had evidently not known in years. When we parted, I half expected him to weep. Mournfully he wished me goodnight and withdrew to await Marion's return.

Shortly afterward, I received welcome orders to return home. On the eve of my departure I met Giles at his bank and broke the news. He was instantly crestfallen but quickly simulated a gaiety to match mine. I was suddenly reminded how utterly dependent he was on our companionship. There

was something else, too. Marion and he had just quarreled. Fiercely.

"She wouldn't leave me alone last night, wouldn't let me smoke in peace. At first I gave her insult for insult. Then I ignored her. That made her wilder. I went down to the basement."

He had stayed there all night, even after she had retired, exhausted from her diatribe.

We caught a bus. "If she's home tonight I'll throw her out, God help me. This is your last night here. She's not going to spoil it."

We collected a couple of flagons of beer at the Full Moon and when we reached the house I saw anxiety in his face. He was praying she would not be at home. So was I.

THE HOUSE was empty but a card lay propped on the mantelpiece. He read it aloud. "After last night you are not fit to live with. Husband you call yourself. I despise you. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

He did something I had never seen him do before. He opened his mouth wide and roared with laughter. "If only she *means* it," he gasped. "God, I hope she never comes back. Here, half a minute, Jack." He winked. "I've a dam' good meerschaum I only keep for celebrations. Haven't used it since VE Day."

And he clattered down to the basement.

There was silence. Then a great cry like that of a scalded animal. In one bound I was at the top of the steps.

"Herbert, what on earth—"

His wailing ended with a torrent of curses.

"Jack . . . here. Quickly, for God's sake." The voice was frantic, broken. "See what that . . . that . . . see what she's *done*."

It wasn't a pleasant sight. A frightening exhibition of spite. The lock had been forced, the velvet drape torn out, the pipes scattered over the floor. Some were cruelly chipped. The stem of the Dutch clay was snapped. Two bowls had been crushed by a frenzied heel.

Herbert knelt in the middle of it all, fond-

ling the ruin of his beloved treasures, whimpering and incredulous. I took his arm. He shook his head slowly.

I suppose I was with him almost an hour. Then I got up. "I'm really sorry, Herbert. I know what you must feel. If I could do something—"

His eyes burned. "If I ever see her again. . . ."

"Try and relax. I don't like leaving you in this mood. Relax enough to shake my hand and wish me good-by."

I promised to write. "Don't bother to show me out."

I gave him an encouraging smile. But there was fury in his eyes when I left and his right hand clutched the wreckage of the pipe made from a human thigh-bone.

Going upstairs, I felt vaguely alarmed. If Marion had any sense she would not show up here in a hurry. I reached for my hat and found myself staring at the small blue food-ration book tossed carelessly on the hallstand. It wasn't Herbert's. The signature, bold and peremptory, was unmistakably Marion's. I knew English civilians rarely went far without their ration books. In her rage Marion might have forgotten it. Or intended to return.

I groped my way through an autumn fog to the railway station. As I was not likely to see Giles again thoughts of him slowly yielded to personal plans and anticipations.

I edged to the curb as a woman emerged from the damp grayness ahead, was for an instant visible in the feeble glimmer of a street lamp, then vanished behind me. I paused. Surely I had seen that face before, turned to the wall in a stuffy living room. The glimpse had been so fleeting though, I could not be certain.

I NEVER thought I would return to Europe other than as a vacationing civilian but reckoned that before the Berlin Airlift. By the fall of 1948, I was back over there, struggling with supply problems almost as formidable as those of the war. While at home I had received three letters from Herbert Giles and in only one, the first, did he mention his wife. "We have parted for good. She is with her sister-in-law in Dun-

dee. She will never come back to worry me. I am alone now. But quite contented."

He went on to discuss his tobacco-growing. Dollar-conservation, a curtailment of purchases from America, had produced a shortage which Herbert was meeting with renewed attempts at home cultivation.

Further letters were cheerful bulletins of his progress in this and in the restoration of his pipe collection. The belated serenity bestowed by Marion's absence was very evident. He would conclude with an invitation to "cross the pond and look me up. Do we have to wait for another war before we meet?"

Airlift duties kept me in Frankfurt most of the time and it was six weeks before I could snatch a furlough in England. I made straight for Digpoole.

It was exactly the same. Change would forever be defied by such enduring conspiracies as Digpoole's Town Hall, petrified streets and, crouched in attitudes of waiting, the stubborn gray houses. The citizens, it was plain, were meeting the austere uncertainties of peace as they had the discomforts of war. With detachment, a little scorn, and sheltered by an aura of unquestionable rectitude. With relief, I found Herbert a refreshing exception.

He was a new man. His earlier bitterness had yielded to a buoyancy of mood, vivid in his every word, every deed. Eagerly, he asked about America, Germany, the Airlift. He talked all the way to the basement where he showed me the beginnings of his new collection, the flue he had constructed for curing his tobacco, the leaves themselves, healthy specimens in tightly bound bunches. Out in the garden, more grew within a carefully roped-off plot.

More surprises awaited me in the living room. Laden pipe racks, bright new carpets, fresh coats of paint had worked wonders. Marion's severe portraits were replaced by pictures of tobacco fields clipped from the *National Geographic*.

We sat and smoked. Naturally, he was keen to hear my opinion of his product.

"You may find it a little on the strong side. I had a bit of trouble with my latest crop."

It was necessary to combat an unusual

pungency at first, but, although it never attained the smooth coolness of a professionally prepared leaf, I became accustomed to its tang and not unattractive aroma. I nodded approval and puffed with pleasure.

Herbert watched me, his face tranquil. But his eyes contained a strange glint of mischief and even triumph. I had the feeling that he was enjoying some huge but secret joke which, regretfully, he could not possibly share.

Not too tactfully, I asked whether he had heard from Marion.

"Not a word. She'll never worry me again, thank God."

"Then you don't know for sure she is with her sister-in-law?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. Yes, come to think of it there was one letter. Asking for her clothes to be sent on." He chuckled. "Left in such a hurry she didn't even bother to pack."

He thrust more of his tobacco at me. I had never smoked so much in all my life. He rambled on, words slipping out as lazily as the drifting smoke from his pipe.

"Knew better than to come back here after what she did . . . If she had, I'd have . . . I'd have. . . ."

He yawned. The sherry was having its effect. His eyes closed.

Then I felt terribly alone. A perplexity wrinkled my forehead, my sluggish brain wrestled with a handful of his words which it refused to admit. *She knew better than to come back. . . .*

MY TEETH tightened on the pipe stem, felt it give, begin to crack. *She knew better than to come back.* Had I not seen her go back after the insane slaughter of the pipes? Or had I been mistaken in the fog? I no longer felt alone, but was conscious of a presence other than that of the now snoring Herbert.

Perhaps it was this room, too indelibly stamped with Marion to be completely cordial. Herbert's innovations, the pipes, new paint, the pictures, formed just a desperate facade behind which *her* despotic spirit still lurked. He had not expelled it. He had simply brushed it under the carpet.

I shook my head fiercely, rescued his pipe

from a circle of spilled ash and cleaned it. His keys lay on the table. I took them and the pipe to the basement. The sherry—or the two-powerful tobacco—was making me stagger slightly and I threw open the door to Herbert's collection with greater force than was needed. It smacked against the wall and the shock dislodged something behind the felt drape which was the pipes' bed.

I fumbled inside and drew forth a handful of faded papers. Sales slips bearing Marion's signature. And a ration book dated 1945. Hers, the one she should have returned for. Or asked for later when she wrote for her clothes.

No clear notion pierced my wine-cloudy mind but for some reason I shuddered violently and was left breathless. Carefully I replaced the papers and returned to Herbert.

His eyes blinked open. "Enjoy your smoke, Jack?"

I nodded. He grinned and I grinned along with him but for the life of me I did not know why.

I was first out of bed next morning. My train was an early one. A letter was sticking through the mail slot. The postman must have been in a hurry for the thing was in danger of falling back outside. I plucked it in.

"Herb, there's a letter. Shall I . . ."

The postmark silenced me. Dundee. It was addressed to Mrs. Herbert Giles. *Mrs.*

Neither of us spoke throughout breakfast until I promised to pay him another visit. He barely touched his food and the letter, twice read, lay at his elbow. He seemed utterly lost, not in the natural despondency of a parting but with a kind of dull resignation.

When I rose to go he followed wearily. I placed an arm about his shoulders.

"Buck up, now. After all. . ."

"Major Towers," the sudden formality checked me. But he was intense, anxious. "Major, would you care to have . . . my pipes?"

"What on earth—"

"I mean it. Don't think I'll be needing them much longer."

"You drank too much sherry last night." I picked up my suitcase.

"Major . . . Jack, your folks, they know about me, don't they?"

"My wife does, certainly. Why?"

"Nothing." He peered at his feet and said quietly, "I wish I were coming with you. When you go back home. If I could start all over, like having a new life. . ."

When he lifted his eyes again they were too bright in his pallid face. I sensed words on his lips, words I did not want to hear. I had no doubt the letter had wrought this change. We exchanged a handclasp and I turned to leave him standing there, staring dumbly after me.

FOR MONTHS I received no word from Digpoole. When I got up there again and turned the corner to his street, the houses were no longer waiting. They were agitated by a restless twitching of window curtains and peering faces. And they feasted nervously upon the milling uproar before them. An aimless mob, swarming like blind ants. Prominent in its midst, the spike-helmeted blue of police. The air buzzed with murmurs and hoarse commands. The crowd was outside Herbert's house.

It took me five minutes to shoulder my way to a constable. I spoke to him. He disappeared into the house and returned with a thick-set man wearing a blue macintosh and an expression of polite gravity. He was a detective-inspector.

"So you were a friend of his? He never told you where his wife was?"

"Yes, he did. With her sister-in-law, in Dundee."

"Mrs. Giles hasn't been seen in Dundee for years. Her sister-in-law wrote every two or three months and got replies noticeably shorter than Mrs. G. was accustomed to make. Let's go inside."

Pólice were everywhere. They were opening drawers and making notes and prying and probing. Apprehension was swelling in me. I wanted to leave.

The inspector said, "Mrs. Bates—the sister-in-law—was too ill to come down here so he had nothing to fear from that quarter. Furthermore, her eyesight was bad. Giles kept the answering letters short, so as to keep the risk down. He had a few samples

of his wife's handwriting. Mrs. Bates was easily deceived."

He broke off to issue orders to a policeman. During the interruption I heard busy championing noises from the garden. My apprehension increased. The inspector continued in serious tones.

"As it's turned out, Mrs. Bates's frailty was not wholly beneficial to Giles. The brother got his service discharge on compassionate grounds to take care of his wife. He was brought home from Hong Kong. Mrs. Bates wrote to tell her sister-in-law that Tom was arriving and would drop in on her and Herbert before carrying on up to Scotland. He did. He wasn't satisfied with Giles's explanation of her absence and asked a few questions locally. He finally came to us. Let's go into the garden."

I hung back. He took my arm, gently. "You can see him. We'll make no formal arrest until we discover . . . any traces."

The thing began to dovetail in my shocked mind. Having killed her (how, I could not know), he had enjoyed a Marion-free life as long as he could. He must have known



that one day, Tom would return and the jig would be up. When he received the letter he had known the end could not now be long delayed. There might have been a moment of panic, wild plans for flight. But there was no way out. And why run? It had been worth it.

The inspector said, "He admitted he buried her in the garden. Are murderers as unoriginal in your country?"

Herbert's method of body-disposal might well be hackneyed. But when I saw where they were digging I felt that his taste for ironic revenge, like his tobacco, was not without a distinctive flavor.

A WATERY sunlight saturated the scene. Police and photographers formed a

ragged circle. A British Army corporal watched, frequently brushing a hand across his face. Herbert leaned against the wall, looking faintly dismayed. Nobody spoke.

In that corner of the garden he had tended so proudly, so carefully, two men dug, growling and panting. Herbert's precious plants were scattered and trampled. He saw me and smiled.

"Major . . . Jack . . . now will you have my pipes?" He shifted, self-consciously. "Sorry I can't offer you any sherry."

I tried to smile in return but my face muscles froze.

Herbert was calm. He had had a three-year feast of freedom and was prepared to face the reckoning. He grinned over at me. "Gave us a good crop, didn't she? Had a kind of posthumous utility, you might say."

The diggers paused, glaring at him with distaste and no comprehension. They spat and went on digging.

"You won't find her," Herbert said. "She went up in smoke."

The digging ceased abruptly. The men rested their spades, straightened and nodded. The police closed in. Herbert swayed. A sick feeling in my stomach spread and I fled to the bathroom.

Later, walking with the inspector to his car, I felt the houses eying our departure with cool triumph. He said, "That pipe collection. Probably go into Scotland Yard's museum. Unless you want it? I believe you could—"

"No." I was feeling weak. "No, I don't want it."

"We'd like a statement from you, of course . . . I'll see there's no inconvenience."

He filled his pipe and offered his pouch to me. "Care for some?"

I recoiled as if I had been offered strychnine.

Before the trial ended, I was back home. Not that it lasted very long. The jury was unmoved by defense pictures of a "man who wouldn't hurt a fly" being goaded by a haridan into an unpremeditated act. Upon the proceedings, Herbert gazed with a detachment which he maintained to the end.

I suppose I'll return to pipe smoking after a while. A long while. ● ● ●

The Trouble Twins

By BILL CARROLL

"Treat a broad nice and she'll treat you like dirt," Rigby said. It was the wrong thing to say, for a man who wanted to stay alive

RIGBY frowned when the man came into his office. He didn't like interruptions, and he had been listening to Joe Betz, football forecaster extraordinary, on the radio. Nevertheless, business is business. So Rigby reached behind him, turned off the radio, and smiled.

"Tim Rigby?" the man asked. He was a big, good-looking man, about twenty-four.

"Yeah," said Rigby. "You?"

"Ernie Panterra."

Rigby made like he was thumbing an imaginary memo book. "Ernie Panterra," he pretended to read. "Georgia Tech. Right half. All Southern star. One half of Pittsburgh Porkers Touchdown Twins. Should mow down enemy tack—"

"Can it," Panterra said. "Eddie Hughes recommended you. He told me you were tough. 'He carries his heart in a shoulder holster,' he said. He didn't tell me you were a comedian."

Rigby turned off his smile. "Suppose you do the talking."

"Read this." Panterra shoved a slip of paper under Rigby's nose. Rigby took it. It was a poorly typewritten message:

PANTERRA. WE GOT BROTHER LOU.
LOSE LOS ANGELES GAME. DON'T
CALL COPS OR PITTSBURGH WILL
HAVE CORPSE IN ITS BACKFIELD.

"The corpse being Lou," Rigby said. "Is that right?"

Panterra nodded.

Rigby tickled his nose with the note while he talked. "I remember Lou," Rigby said. "I was a senior when Lou was a soph. I guess you know we played together at Northwestern."

Panterra nodded again. Rigby didn't notice whether he did or not. He was staring at shadowed stadiums in time.

"What a halfback. And what a dancer. Did he ever marry that girl—that Mary? I remember he brought her to a dance at Evanston."

Rigby noticed Panterra's face reddening. "No," Panterra said. "She *was* Lou's girl."

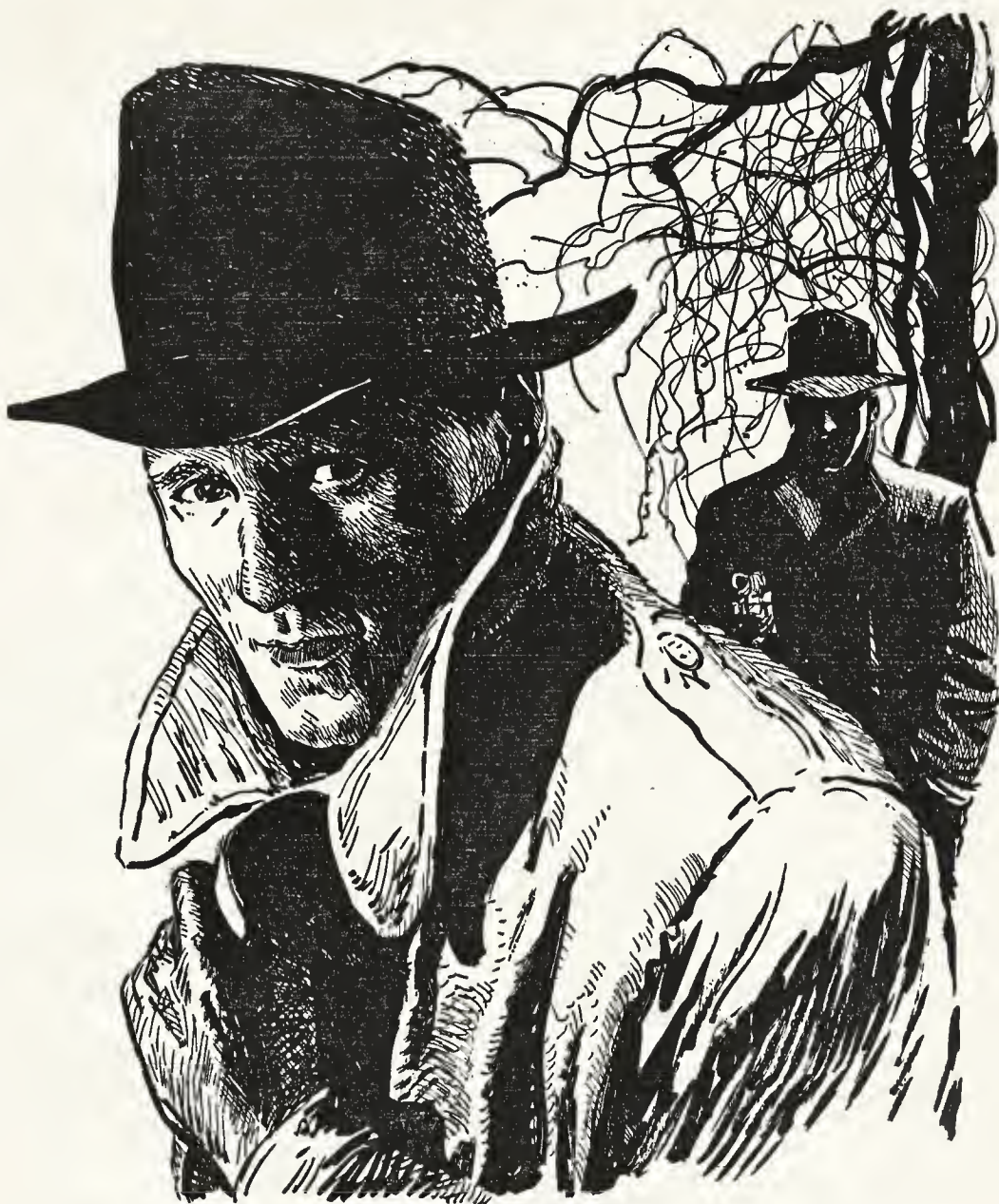
Rigby got the wrong idea. "That's the way it goes," he said. "Treat a broad nice, she treats you like dirt."

"Shut up about what you don't know, shamus," Panterra said. "And never call her a broad."

"Sorry. I didn't realize she was a family affair. Forget it. What's in it for me if I help you out?" He was suddenly business-like.

"A grand, if you get my brother out of this jam."

"Consider me your employee," Rigby said. "Suppose you give me the details."



Rigby knew there was no use trying to run

"Los Angeles is supposed to be a push-over, tomorrow," Panterra began. "The smart boys figure to clean up if the Porkers lose. And believe me, L. A. can win. They've got a tough bunch on the line, and this guy Sanborn can pass you crazy. We're favored

only because . . . You figure it, shamus."

RIGBY lit a cigarette. "You're killing me with your modesty, Panterra. Okay. With the Panterra brothers in the backfield, Pittsburgh can't lose. Feel good now?

You're going to say it looks like the smart boys had Lou kidnapped to insure their dough. Now turn off the theory faucet, and tell me just what the hell happened."

Panterra rumbled in his chest. "I'd like to bust you one, shamus," he said.

"You're not the first, and I'd like to bust you one, too," Rigby returned. They traded glares. "But it's bad for business. Now what happened?"

Panterra grinned suddenly. "Sorry, shamus. I'm just worried about Lou is all. A couple hours ago I get the note. It's slid under my door. I ask the clerk in the lobby if anybody strange comes in. He says no. I ask the bellhops. They don't see nothing. Anybody might have slipped it under my door any time last night. I run over and tell Hughesie. He says keep it tight, see you. Here we are."

"Who does know about it?" Rigby asked.

"You, me, Hughes and my family, mother and father. I had to tell them."

"Where can I locate you if I need you?"

Panterra handed Rigby a card. "Here's my phone. It's private. I got a suite at the Schenley. Three-o-eight."

"Close the door when you go," Rigby said.

Panterra didn't understand Rigby's hint. Instead of going, he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"If I told you," Rigby said, "you could be a private detective, too. Now get the hell out of here and I'll go to work."

Panterra left, looking very disgusted. Rigby reached back, turned on the radio again. He caught the tail end of Joe Betz's predictions. The Porkers over Los Angeles by three touchdowns. The Panterra brothers made the difference. Rigby turned it off, got up and went out.

* * * * *

Rigby saw Coach Hughes at the stadium. The coach was sitting on a bench near the sidelines, all alone. No one else was in the stadium.

Rigby, in a trench coat, walked up behind him. "Figured you'd be here, Hughesie." Hughes didn't look up. He played with a felt hat between his hands.

"Hi, Tim," he said.

"Like to be alone before the game," Rigby said. He didn't ask. He was asserting. He knew how it was in football. How every game was a battle. Especially for a coach in the pro loop.

"Yeah," Hughes said.

"Win tomorrow?"

Hughes turned around to face him. He didn't answer. He only said, "Ernie see you?"

"Can you give me any dope, Hughesie?"

"I only know what Ernie told me. Looks pretty open and shut. Hope they don't hurt the kid."

"You throwing it?"

"Hell, no."

"How about Panterra? I mean Ernie."

"First sign I get of him laying down, out he goes."

"That's the way Lou would want it," Rigby said.

"Why'd it have to happen? Even before this business we stood a damn good chance of losing."

"Coaches' blues," Rigby observed.

"Don't believe what you read in the papers, Tim. There's been dissension in the club. How can we keep winning if the two stars keep bickering, putting everybody on edge?"

"I'm getting interested," Rigby said. "What do they fight about?"

"God knows," Hughes said. "Ernie always was a big head. Now Lou seems to want to grandstand, too. You just can't have two stars on one team. Not when both want the headlines."

"You think that's it?"

"I don't know what it is, Tim. I do know that the touchdown twins are going to be split up this winter. I can't have it. I don't care if we finish last."

"You'll never finish last, Hughes." Rigby put a huge paw on the coach's shoulder. "Where can I find the doll Lou goes with?" Rigby asked.

"Catch her as she comes from work. Telephone company. Wilks Heights. Name's Mary La Palma. She ought to be through about five."

"I met her once. I'll know her if I see her."

RIGBY left the coach. At a quarter to five his Buick was parked across from the Telephone Building. Every few minutes a girl left the building. He looked eagerly for Mary La Palma. Once a red-lipped girl returned his scrutiny with a knowing stare. He frowned under his hat. Then he spotted Mary. She carried a topcoat over her arm. It was warm for late October. He knew her all right. She was nice looking. Black hair loose over the shoulders. A tight-fitting suit. Probably wears a girdle, was what Rigby thought.

"Hi, Mary," was what he said.

She looked surprised. He got out of the car.

"Can I give you a ride home?" he asked her.

"No, thanks."

"Wait a minute. You don't remember me. I'm Tim Rigby. We met at a dance in Evans-ton seven years ago. Maybe it was eight. I'm a friend of Lou's."

She said she remembered, but Rigby could tell she didn't. He decided to try the straight-forward approach. He told her he was a detective. When he told her Lou was in trouble he scored. She got into the car. He got behind the wheel and started to drive.

"Maybe you can help me," Rigby began. "You'll be helping Lou if you do."

He gave her the story as he heard it. Then he said, "You're close to Lou. Can you tell me if anybody's tried to see him? You know, any pressure applied?" He had to wait until she stopped sobbing.

"I was . . . we were going to get married, Mister Rigby. We were, until Ernie started paying attention to me. I was a fool. I thought I'd make Lou jealous. Instead, he left me altogether. About two weeks ago." Every sentence was punctuated by a burst of tears. Rigby was getting fed up with it. He never did like soap operas. He decided they were even worse in real life. He pushed open the glove compartment, gave her a pack of tissues.

"Were Lou and Ernie on friendly terms?" he asked.

"They haven't actually fought," she replied. "If they're angry at each other, they manage to keep it to themselves."

"Ernie or Lou tell you about any threats?"

"Look, Mister Rigby, I haven't seen Lou for two weeks. My feeling for Ernie is purely platonic. I wish to God I could help Lou somehow, but I just don't know anything about it."

Rigby shrugged a shoulder and drove her to her home. He looked at her front door as it closed behind her. Two hours of private investigating.

Results: None.

He phoned Panterra from a drugstore. Rigby asked Panterra where Lou was last seen. Panterra told him and said keep trying. Rigby wrote the address on a card.

It was a small frame house. No one was on the streets. The smell of cooking came from the house next door. Rigby tried the doorbell. When no one answered, he knocked. An elderly little Italian woman came to the door.

"Mrs. Panterra?"

The woman regarded Rigby suspiciously.

"I'm a private detective Ernie hired. I want to help Lou."

"Wait, please." The woman shut the door. A moment later a man appeared. The man was small and thin like the woman. He beckoned Rigby into the house.

Rigby followed the man through a hallway and into the kitchen. A boy of about twelve looked up at Rigby with mournful eyes from across the empty table.

"You are the detective?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Rigby said. "Rigby."

"Ernest told us he hired one."

"Yeah," Rigby said again.

The man addressed the boy. "Gino, tell Mister Rigby what you saw last night."

The kid was as skinny as any Rigby had ever met. "I seen Lou get into a car last night with a man," he said.

"One man?" Rigby asked.

"He was a man not as big as Lou," the kid said. "He had a gun."

"You mean he made Lou get into the car."

"Yeah," the kid said.

"What kind of car was it?"

"A big one. I don't know what kind. I was scared."

"You didn't tell the police."

"I was scared," the kid said.

"What did you do?"

"Nothin'."

"You didn't tell anybody?"

"I went home and went to bed. I told Ernie when I saw him on the street a little while ago. I was afraid he was going to hit me when I told him."

The old man interrupted. "Gino lives a few doors up the street. His father often has trouble with the police. Gino feared his father's anger if he brought the police to his home."

"But I had to tell somebody, Mister. That's why I told Ernie," Gino said.

Rigby gave the kid a dollar. "Sure, Gino, I know how it is. Now what time did you see this?"

"Geez, thanks, Mister. It was right after basketball practice at the gym. Around nine o'clock."

"The man that Lou went with. What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see his face. He had a hat on. He was a little skinny guy."

RIGBY came out of the Panterra's house feeling better than when he went in. He had been straining truth from lies for several years now. He thought the kid was telling the truth. Up until now, he had only Panterra's story to work on. The talk with the kid verified Panterra's story. It's always nice to know you can trust the guy you work for. Rigby trusted no one. Maybe Panterra was on the square. He thought about it as he drove around the streets.

Rigby parked across from the Schenley Hotel. In the lobby, he asked the old-maidish looking desk clerk to ring Mister Panterra's rooms. Without bothering to look over her bifocals at him, the woman told him Mister Panterra had gone out. In reply to his query as to how long Mister Panterra would be gone, she told him that Mister Panterra had left word that he would return at nine. Rigby glanced at the clock behind the desk. He had an hour and forty-five minutes to wait. Rigby thanked her, asked the direction to the bar, and went down the steps to it.

He didn't go into the bar. He walked along a corridor to the far end of the hotel. He climbed the stairs to the third floor. No one

was in the corridor. He had to try a dozen keys in the lock of 308 before one turned. It only turned part way. Rigby pulled up on the door and forced the key. The lock clicked. He paused inside the door to see if anyone had heard, but no one came.

He flipped the light switch. He searched Panterra's clothes in the closets first. It was a large order. Panterra had plenty of clothes. Then Rigby turned to a chest of drawers. A picture of Mary La Palma was on the chest. Something written on the picture had been obliterated. There was a snapshot of Mary in a swim suit, stuck in the mirror. Half of the snapshot had been cut away. Somebody's arm was around Mary's waist. Rigby was willing to bet the arm belonged to Lou.

Rigby found nothing unusual in the chest. There was nothing unusual to be found in the whole place. He was looking at a desk when the phone rang. He jumped involuntarily. On the third ring he picked up the receiver.

"Yeah," he said in a voice that he thought was like Panterra's.

"Panterra?" The voice sounded far away.

Rigby grunted.

"Bring the dough. You know where. I'm waiting."

"Uh-huh," Rigby said.

Rigby left 308 as he had found it. He hurried out to his car. It was half an hour before he saw Ernie Panterra pull up in his convertible. When Panterra had gone into the hotel, Rigby ran over to a drugstore. He dialed the number Panterra had given him. Panterra answered the phone.

"Panterra?" Rigby said in far-away voice that he thought sounded like the one that had called earlier.

"Who is this?"

Rigby grunted. "Bring the dough you know where," he said. "I'm waiting."

"Be right out," Panterra said. "Everything okay?"

"The dough," Rigby said and hung up.

Rigby tailed the convertible. He almost lost it at Negley and Stanton, where a red light held him up. When he saw the lights of the car turn right three blocks ahead, he gunned his Buick forward before the light

changed. Playing a hunch, he caught the other car as it moved onto Allegheny River Boulevard. He followed it across the river and up a narrow road on the other side. He lost it around some hairpin turns, but then he spotted it parked outside what looked like an empty house. He kept driving without reducing his speed for about a mile, swung into some underbrush, then started legging it back.

When he got to the house, the convertible was still there. He placed one foot after another, moving stealthily. He could see no one in Ernie Panterra's car. At the window of the house, he could see nothing, hear nothing. It was a black night. The moon was somewhere behind the clouds. Rigby edged along the side of the house. He caught voices coming from the back. He looked around the corner of the place. Two men, Panterra and a smaller guy, stood in the light from a pale lantern in the small guy's hand.

"I charge a lot for a job. I want my customers satisfied." The little guy dangled the lantern close to the ground as he spoke. Panterra prodded something with his foot. Rigby saw what it was.

"You earned your dough, Volpe. I got it in the car," Panterra said. *Volpe*. It hit

Rigby suddenly, like a buttonhook pass. *Volpe, Vincent X. Three arrests on suspicion of murder. One indictment. No convictions.*

Volpe was talking again. "Grab a hold on him. There's a ravine about thirty or forty yards back. It'll be a while before anyone finds him, and when they do, you'll be in the clear."

THE MOON brushed through a cloud pack. Its light fell over the house. Volpe saw Rigby, and his hand was in and out of a pocket before Rigby even thought about grabbing his gun. Volpe moved swiftly to his left to keep Rigby from getting the house between them. Rigby knew there was no use running. He came toward Volpe, hands high and wide apart.

"That's a good boy," Volpe said. "Don't try to be cuté. This is a very touchy gun. Check him for a rod," he ordered Panterra.

Panterra moved in from the side. He felt Rigby's automatic at the first try. He fished it out of the pocket, gave it to Volpe.

"Know him?" Volpe asked.

"Private dick," Panterra said. "Supposed to be part of my alibi."

"Good-by, alibi," Rigby said.

"That's what you think," said Panterra. "Hughes knows about the kidnap note. He suggested you. It'll look like you got wise to the gang, so they bumped you. A smart shamus not smart enough."

"Start walking," Volpe snapped.

Rigby went in front of Volpe. The moon had gone back to bed, and it was quiet out here in the country. Rigby had a tickle in his spine. It was as if Volpe were tickling his back with the ugly barrel of the snub pistol he held. As if talking might put off the moment, Rigby talked.

"So make me a smart enough shamus," he said.

"I'm going to make you a dead enough shamus," Volpe said.

"The bundle Panterra's dragging is his brother?" Rigby asked.

"Bright boy."

They stopped. They waited for Panterra to bring up his bundle. Panterra dragged his brother to the edge of the ravine. He



"Within 500 years, the ceaseless action of snow and rain, heat and frost, would break up these rocks—but no, it's got to be done now!"

straightened up, panting. "Lord, that brother of mine is heavy."

"Fast though, for a two-hundred pounder," Rigby said.

"Shut up," Panterra said.

"I finally figured it out, golden-boy." Rigby started to talk fast, now, not knowing when Volpe's slug would rip him. "You thought if your brother was kidnapped and killed the cops would figure the racket gang bumped him off. You took advantage of the fact that a lot of Pittsburgh dough is riding on the Porkers. You typed the note after Volpe took Lou for a ride. You showed it to Hughes and me, so we'd believe Lou was kidnapped. With Lou gone, the gamblers stood to win plenty on L. A. It would look like a typical gang murder."

"You think I'm in on the pay-off to throw the game, don't you, shamus?"

"Wrong, Panterra. I think you're a yellow rat who had his brother killed to clear the way for himself with a certain broad."

It was like a last-second field goal from the forty. Panterra's feelings were raw where Mary La Palma was concerned. First Panterra struck Rigby across the face with the meaty part of his hand.

"I told you not to call her a broad, smart guy."

Panterra swung a fist at Rigby's jaw that traveled like a greyhound. Rigby's jaw

traveled like the mechanical bunny at the tracks. The greyhound never catches the bunny. Panterra missed the punch. He stumbled forward. Rigby's foot tripped him as Volpe's gun barked. The slug ripped Rigby's shoulder. It didn't stop him from landing a heavy kick on Volpe's shin. It didn't stop Panterra from plunging over the edge of the hillside.

Volpe cried out and missed his second shot. He didn't get a third shot because Rigby was on top of him, squeezing his neck very tightly. Volpe's gun fell to the ground. It was a very touchy gun. It went off. All the fight went out of the little guy. Rigby was still holding him under the jaw a minute later when he realized that he was strangling a dead man. He let Volpe slump to the ground, grabbed the touchy gun and went after Panterra. He found him scrambling up the slope. He waited until he reached the crest before he covered him.

"You know, Panterra, I'm real sorry you had to kill your brother. And I'm kind of sorry that you're going to burn in the chair."

Panterra was surly. "What are you so worried about, shamus! I thought you carried your heart in a shoulder holster."

Rigby spat blood on the ground. "Yeah," he said. "But I got twenty-five bucks riding on the Porkers. Come on, Panterra, we got a date with the law." ● ● ●

A TRIPLE DOSE OF MURDER!



SOFTLY CREEP AND SOFTLY KILL!

—by Peter Paige

ALL SHE WANTS IS MONEY!

—by Emmett McDowell

KILLER, WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

—by Frederick C. Davis

25c—Summer TRIPLE DETECTIVE—25c

DETECTIVE MOVIE NEWS

Niagara

Jeopardy

The Persuader

The Glass Wall

Desperate Search

YOU need iron nerves to go to the movies this season, but no brains at all. There's foul play aplenty, but it's always an open and shut case, at least for the audience. You'll know who's up to no good right from the start; the question is will he (or she) get away with it.

There's no question, however, about whether you'll have an exciting time. Take *Niagara*, for instance, and you take Marilyn Monroe. Maybe that's enough said, but just in case you'd like some details, *Niagara* is the story of a two-timing wife who transforms a honeymooners' paradise into a death-trap for her husband. Joseph Cotten is her intended victim, a battle-shocked

veteran whose insane jealousy turns out to be well-founded.

The movie was filmed in Technicolor (and it's a toss-up which is more photogenic—Marilyn or the rainbow-hued Falls) Black-and-white film was used in one scene, though, for as eerie an effect as you'll ever see. Marilyn is visiting a morgue. Everything is stark white or somber black, except Marilyn's hair and eyes, which were photographed in their natural, vivid color for a startling contrast. We predict that after *Niagara* is released some group of college boys will vote Marilyn "the girl we'd most like to visit a morgue with."

The featured players, technical crew and a truck convoy of 50 tons of equipment went from 20th Century-Fox studios in Hollywood to Niagara Falls, Ontario, to make the picture. The rest of the cast was filled by nearly 40 New York actors who commuted as needed, plus 200 local residents who were extras.

The noisiness and dampness of the Falls resulted in several headaches—not for the actors but for the soundmen and cameramen. The soundmen finally gave up as a bad job their efforts to record dialogue over the roar; they simply recorded the background and re-dubbed the actors' conversations when they got back to Hollywood.

But for the cameramen the problem was more difficult, since the spray constantly fogged up their lenses. The problem was solved by a device that got nicknamed the "Whirling Dervish," a fan that spun in front of the cameras, exactly timed so as not to interfere with the shutter. It's the same principle, incidentally, that the Air Force uses to enable machine gunners to shoot

America's Number 1 whistle-bait, Marilyn Monroe, makes with a scream in "Niagara"

Twentieth Century-Fox



through airplane propellers.

After one busy day of make-believe crime, the company got back to their lodgings to be confronted by real-life crime. Their rooms had been rifled and personal possessions stolen. The unluckiest fellow was a make-up man who got home just in time to be slugged by the thieves. The culprits never were caught, and the Johnston Office, which sees to it that movie criminals always get punished, couldn't do a thing about it.

Battle with the Surf

Another thriller for you is Barbara Stanwyck's new movie for MGM, *Jeopardy*. If this one doesn't have you on the edge of your seat, well, you're probably missing your spine. Barbara, for a change, is a decent gal, a loving wife and mother, in a desperate spot. Her husband (Barry Sullivan) is pinned on the beach by heavy timbers, as the tide comes relentlessly in. She goes for help and finds an escaped convict (Ralph Meeker), who forces her to go with him, as the police close relentlessly in.

The scenes in *Jeopardy* alternate between shots of the husband lying helpless in the sand, his son (Lee Aaker) holding his head above water, and shots of the wife, a pistol in her ribs, making a rash bargain with the killer.

Maybe you've never heard of Pioneertown, California, but chances are you've seen it dozens of times—in Westerns and in adventure stories laid all over the world. Pioneertown's chief industry is providing back-grounds (and often extra players) for the movies. It's well equipped, boasting both mountains and desert, and it was here that Barbara and Ralph went on their wild ride. Pioneertown couldn't fill the bill, however, for beach and ocean, so the company went to Dana Point, where Barry and Lee fought their battle with the raging surf.

All-Around Gal

The theme of the killer on the run is used in an RKO movie, too. But *The Persuader* is exclusively a story of a chase. Two sane men are at the mercy of a madman; they are

forced to be fugitives like him, and under the pressure of his unbalanced mentality they nearly crack themselves.

Here is a movie with a one-track mind. Nothing unrelated was allowed to creep into the story. There's a cast of four—the killer, William Talman; his two victims, Edmond O'Brien and Frank Lovejoy; a policeman, Jose Torvay. No girl, no love story. No comedian, no comedy relief. *The Persuader* is a tough story, building ruthlessly to a savage climax.

And the person chiefly responsible for this red-blooded he-man film is a petite blonde who collected enough fame and cash for her acting to satisfy most girls. But it wasn't enough for Ida Lupino. She became the only successful woman director in Hollywood history. Up to now, she's dealt mainly with women's problems, but with *The Persuader* Ida is apparently out to prove she can do anything. She not only directed the actors in this masculine melodrama, but she also wrote the script.

Vittorio Gassman is making his American debut in a movie called *The Glass Wall*. Until the movie is released (by Columbia) Vittorio's chief claim to fame, in this country anyway, is that he married Shelley Winters. In his native Italy, however, he's acclaimed as an actor, having appeared in 93 stage shows and 20 movies.

The Glass Wall is a pretty far cry from a detective story, since nobody gets killed and the only criminal in the movie is the hero. What's more, you'll find yourself cheering him on, hoping he'll get away with his law-breaking. Vittorio plays a refugee, trying to escape the immigration authorities and find a haven in the United States. Gloria Grahame is his partner in crime, joining him in the almost impossible search for the one man who can swear that the refugee is not a Communist spy.

Since nearly every movie we've told you about seems to deal with the hunted or the hunter or both, we might as well round out the column with *Desperate Search*, MGM's adventure tale of two kids who alone survive a plane crash, and of their father's efforts to find them in the wilderness. The principal villain in this one is a cougar, but he's menac-



Excitement and fear dominate MGM's new film, "Desperate Search." Stars Jane Greer and Howard Keel are shown in an anxious moment

ing enough for anyone. Singing star Howard Keel is giving his tonsils a rest and turning straight dramatic actor as the star of *Desperate Search*. Supporting him are Jane Greer and two youngsters, Linda Lowell and Lee Aaker (the busy boy who also plays in *Jeopardy*).

It looks to us as if Hollywood is having a cycle of search pictures, but though the themes may seem alike the movies are all varied. And there's nothing more exciting than a good cops-and-robbers show. Anyway, don't blame us—we don't make movies, we only go to them.—Ann Kennedy

FOREIGN NOTES

IN ITALY, a man got revenge on a soldier, Capt. Gualtiero Gualtierotti, by concealing dynamite in the heels of his army boots. When the soldier, a rival of the man in a love affair, clicked his heels in coming to attention as a superior officer approached, there was an explosion. Gualtierotti was killed.

IN ROME, a man killed his wife by shock by staging his own death scene. While his wife was out of the house, he laid himself out with candles and flowers. On seeing what she thought was her husband's corpse, his wife collapsed and died. Police charged him with murder.

The Kiss-and-Kill Murders

A Novel by STEWART STERLING



"Produce or else!" the store president told

*Detective Don Marko. And
so far, he had produced—*

the corpses of two girls!

Chapter 1

THE car's headlights probed beyond the curve of the highway to the massed darkness of close-ranked hemlocks. From the safety fence guarding the curve where it crossed the brook a shadowy grotesqueness rose, flapping and floundering into the path of the Cadillac. The man at the wheel braked, swerved, cursed.

The girl beside him made a frightened movement to shield her face from the expected impact, but the great bird rose clumsily in time to escape more than a touch by the car.

"For God's sake," she murmured, "what was that?"

"Turkey buzzard." The driver swung back to his proper lane. "Carrion buzzard."

"Ugh!" She shuddered. In the dim, reflected glow from the instrument board her delicate features seemed suddenly pinched with terror. "It looked like a fugitive from a bad dream. Do they have many of those things down here on the Eastern Shore?"

"They're common as chickens." He allowed himself a tight, thin-lipped smile. "Matter of fact, they live on chickens. Dead ones the broiler farms throw out. That's all they eat—dead things."

"Brrr. They give me the heebies. This whole country does. Sooner we get out of here, the better it'll suit me." She pushed in the cigarette lighter. "How much further is it, to this God-forsaken place?"

"Few miles." He swung off the through route onto a dirt road. "Don't worry. I don't intend to stay long."

"I don't see why we had to come down here at all."

*"Go on. Upstairs," he ordered,
the gun-barrel pointing at her*

"So you won't make any dumb mistakes if somebody starts to ask questions about your Maryland estate, the way you did when that salesgirl jumped you about the farm up in Connecticut."

The girl shifted her position uneasily. "How could I have guessed she had been born right there in Wilton?"

"You couldn't. But you could have kept your head instead of getting panicky and telling her you'd been living there only a short time—when your family was supposed to have owned the place since the Civil War." He slowed the car at massive brick gateposts, turned in between them to a winding lane guarded by high hedges of box. "Only thing that saved us was that the salesgirl was dumb, too. She thought you were a phony but she wasn't bright enough to follow through on her suspicion and notify one of the store detectives."

"You're always blaming me," she retorted bitterly. "Whatever goes wrong is always my fault."

HE BROUGHT the car to a stop before the low brick porch of a white-pillared Colonial mansion.

"No. It was my error. I don't intend to make the same mistake a second time. That's why I brought you down here to look over the ground."

She opened the car door on her side. In the wedge of brightness from the headlights red eyes glared from the shrubbery at the side of the porch. "Oh! Look!"

"Rabbit," he said. "Thick as fleas this time of year."

"I don't want to stay here! I'll bet there are a million snakes—"

He came around the hood of the car, swinging something that glinted a metallic blue-black. "There aren't any. But this'll take care of anything that shows up." He took her arm.

"No!" she cried. "I'm scared! I don't want to go any further!" She bit hard on the knuckle of her left index finger. "Please don't make me go where it's dark! I can see enough from here!"

He pushed her toward the porch. "Suppose you run up against someone who asks you

if you've had the lovely old staircase fixed up? Don't be silly. Come on inside. Here, take the flashlight."

"There'll be rats!"

"Probably. They won't hurt you."

He used a huge, brass key. The white-paneled front door swung open to disclose a hallway full of shrouded chairs, a hooded grandfather's clock, cloth-covered paintings.

She hung back. "No, please, darling! You wouldn't make me go in there if you cared the least bit for me!"

He slid an arm around her waist. "Stop worrying, baby. I'm right here with you."

She stepped inside the musty-smelling hallway. The beam of her flashlight traveled around the hall, poked into a living room where a white and frightened face stared back at her from an enormous pier-glass—her own face.

The sound of the door closing behind her made her whirl, gasping.

"The wind." He smiled with his mouth; his eyes regarded her with somber calculation.

She found herself unable to do more than whisper, "There isn't—any wind."

"Go on. Upstairs." The gun-barrel pointed.

"No!" she managed, stiff-lipped. "I'm not going up there. I—I'm not going to stay in this house one more minute. I—"

"Yes." The smile remained fixed, unreal. "You're staying."

She retreated from him, backing into the living room. "That's why you brought me here!"

He followed her, unhurried.

She screamed, "No, no! Don't! For God's sake! Wait!!"

The gun roared, and she moaned. The flashlight wavered, fell to the floor, went out.

He waited until he heard her fall, until the labored panting ceased. Then he flicked on his cigarette lighter, found the flashlight.

It was an effort to lift the body, sling it over his shoulder. The difficulty of carrying it up the winding staircase to the second floor, up the straight, steep steps to the third floor, finally up the short, vertical ladder to the trap-door in the roof, left him with hammering heart and throbbing temples.

Once out on the square, railing-enclosed

roof from which some pioneer builder of the mansion had once watched for sails inbound toward his creek, the man lit a cigar before stripping the clothing from the dead girl. He removed her rings, her wrist-watch.

Then he used the butt of the gun to disfigure the face, to smash the dental work in her mouth.

"Okay," he muttered after a long time. "Okay, you rats." He looked out across the wide lawn toward the locust trees and the fringing hemlocks. "Come and get it."

Chapter II

THE Chief of Store Protection scowled down on the umbrella-carrying throngs of New York and the turtling taxis of Fifth Avenue, inching along between red lights and around the high-backed green beetles of the busses. Rain slashed across the avenue in gusty swirls, driving against the third-floor windows of his office in "Nimblett's, The Great Store," puddling the pavements and sloshing small torrents into the gutters. The March morning suited his mood, which was unpleasantly glum.

The harrassed frustration of vehicles and pedestrians down on the cram-jammed avenue was duplicated by the confused futility of his own mental processes. He transferred his brooding glance from the scene below to the curt memorandum on his desk blotter. The signature at the bottom was the same friendly scrawl that had terminated all the brief instructions from the general manager's office. But the tone was brusque and bleak.

Don:

The Board will meet at three tomorrow to take up the Deshla matter. I have notified them that you will have a report to make on it at that time. You will appreciate the urgency of the situation. We would not like to face the necessity of taking the investigation out of your hands.

Bob

That was plain and to the point. "Taking the investigation out of your hands" meant "Get to the bottom of the business within twenty-four hours or get a new job."

The trouble with that was that any other job, at least in the line of store protection, would be a comedown. Just as a demoted four-star general would find it hard to get

command of an army, Don Marko would find it tough to try for a position at one of the city's lesser stores, after four years as head of the detective staff at Nimblett's.

Yet he understood the G.M.'s dilemma. The Deshla business had shaken the confidence of the front office, had put the whole top brass of the big store on edge.

When some crew of slickers could walk in and make off with seventeen thousand dollars' worth of merchandise, apparently without anyone knowing just what had happened to the stuff, then the petty thefts of shoplifters seemed insignificant. To make it worse, until the tangle could be unraveled, the same trick might be pulled over again—for an even larger amount—and the store protection sleuths wouldn't be able to prevent it.

He ran his fingers distractedly through his thick goose-feather-white hair. As of now, three days after the theft had accidentally come to light, all he could honestly report was that somebody must be lying like a trooper, because the thing simply couldn't have happened the way everybody insisted it had. What the Board of Directors would say to any such unsatisfactory report was obvious.

He'd done what he could to plug any possible holes in the store's defenses. But since he couldn't figure out just how the trick had been pulled, he was shooting absolutely blind.

There were a couple of Board members who always had been skeptical of him because they thought he was too young to handle Nimblett's thirty floor detectives. Only his prematurely white hair, his close-cropped mustache and ascetic cast of features had convinced them that he *looked* old enough. Well, another twenty-four hours of this sort of pressure would age him, all right.

His phone rang.

"Mr. Marko? Miss Ennis, Draperies. Miss Bayard asked me to tell you she's bringing someone up to see you."

"Thank you, Miss Ennis."

That was store talk for "She's *pinched* a shoplifter and is on her way to your office with her prisoner." In his present puzzled frame of mind, he'd be inclined toward leniency to any of the light-fingered brother-

hood or sisterhood who'd tried to get away with a five-dollar pen off the leather goods counter or a lighter from the giftwares section.

The red glass button on his inter-com set glowed. He touched the switch. "Yes?"

"Miss Bayard, Mr. Marko."

"Come on in."

Mary Bayard was a gaunt, drab, horsy-faced woman with mild gray eyes which peered out from behind gold-rimmed spectacles with an expression of surprised bewilderment. In fact, she was seldom surprised at anything and never bewildered.

THE girl who preceded her into the office was in striking contrast to the plainclothes woman. She was in her early twenties and remarkably pretty in a thin, pinched fashion. A dainty face; it might have been puritanical except for the petulant fullness of her lips.

Her coat was the finest Shetland; the suit beneath it expensive hand-loomed homespun. If she had bought those shoes at Nimblets, she'd paid around thirty-seven-fifty for them. She wore no jewelry, but her figure was enough to obtain for her the attention which some females try to attract by the display of precious stones.

Mary Bayard held out a flat bronze disc. "She claims her name is Betterson, Mr. Marko. Mrs. Clark F. Betterson. She ordered nearly twelve hundred dollars worth of upholstery fabrics—Brocaded damasks, cut velours, fancy materials. Wanted the section manager to have them shipped to the Betterson place in Old Westbury. Gave the salesgirl this token."

The girl cried indignantly, "You have no right to treat me like a criminal! I haven't taken one single thing out of your old store. You can't say I've stolen anything!"

Don thought there was an undertone of desperation in the soft voice. "Sit down, young lady. If there's been any mistake on Nimblets' part, you can be sure we'll straighten it out to your satisfaction." He looked at the token. It was a genuine Nimblets charge coin, beyond doubt. "Are you Mrs. Betterson?"

The girl hesitated, biting her upper lip. "No." She lifted her chin defiantly. "I found

that coin in the lobby of a hotel and thought it would be fun to see how it felt to pretend I was rich, for once in my life."

Don tossed the charge token up and caught it on his palm. "Kind of expensive fun for us, wasn't it? Shipping all that merchandise out to somebody who didn't want it? So we'd have to bring it all back to the store?"

"I wasn't going through with it," she said sullenly. "I'd have told the clerk it was just a joke before I left. Only, this—person—" she gestured irritably toward Miss Bayard—"raised a rumpus before I had a chance to explain."

Don had heard that one so many times he didn't even trouble to smile at her lack of ingenuity. "What is your name?"

"I won't tell you." The chin went up again. "I don't have to tell you."

"If you don't tell me"—Don shrugged—"you'll have to tell the judge in court."

"You can't arrest me. I haven't done anything."

"Sure. It's a misdemeanor to try to obtain goods by using another person's name. Your case, it's a felony, because of the value of the stuff you tried to get away with."

"I didn't, I tell you! It was just a gag." She didn't act as if she expected him to believe it.

"Well, you can try to sell that to the judge, too." Don took a card out of his side drawer. "But I might point out that if you're anxious to avoid getting your real name in the newspapers, it might be easier to talk to me. Once they book you at the police station, I can't help you at all."

She flung out her hands in appeal. "If I do tell you—who I am—will you let me go?"

"I'll have to know a little more than your name."

Don began to fill in the descriptive blanks on the card. "White—Female—Blonde—Blue—

"What, besides my name?"

"We can't have any Tom, Dick or Harriet coming in the store and ordering a thousand dollars' worth of merchandise charged to somebody else." He scribbled "5' 5" " and "125" on the card. "You claim you found Mrs. Betterson's token. But you didn't find her Old Westbury address on the coin."



Ralph flung his arms out, tried to grab his attacker

"Oh"—she fluttered the fingers of one hand—"I knew where she lived. I've seen her out there at the polo matches—" She stopped as if fearful of having said more than she intended.

"How did you know the Bettertons were home?"

She stared at him, the color draining from her face. "I never thought about it, one way or the other. I meant it just for a practical joke. I don't see what difference it makes."

Don leaned over to speak to the inter-com. "Phone the Clark Betterton estate out in Old Westbury, Long Island. I want to talk to Mrs. Betterton, if she's home."

"Yes, Mr. Marko."

DON tapped the identification card on the desk. "How'd you happen to hit on the drapery department for your practical joke? Why not have the fun of ordering clothes, the way most girls would have, if it was all in the spirit of good, clean fun?"

The girl said, "I just like pretty fabrics, that's all."

Mary Bayard said quietly, "You put the section manager to a great deal of trouble, getting out special patterns and matching colors with those slips in your handbag."

The girl said nothing. Don reached for the handbag.

She snatched it to her breast, held it with her forearms crossed over it protectively. "If you try to touch one single thing, I'll—"

The inter-com said, "The traffic supervisor at Central in Old Westbury says the Betterton phone has been disconnected for the last four weeks, Mr. Marko. Says they can't say for certain, but they understand the place is closed up and that the Bettertons are vacationing on the French Riviera."

Don said, "Thanks a lot." He studied the girl for a moment. "Not such a big joke, now."

She licked her lips. "I didn't know."

He said, "You'll have to make up your mind. Do you want to talk to us or to the police?"

She frowned. "If you'd let me talk to you, alone." She glanced sideward at Miss Bayard. "There are some things I—I simply couldn't tell to any woman."

Mary Bayard's mouth twisted in a dry smile.

Don said, "All right, Mary. You want to wait outside a few minutes?"

Miss Bayard opened the door. "Yes, Mr. Marko." But her expression said she had a pretty good idea what the girl wanted to say without benefit of female audience.

Chapter III

FLANCING over her shoulder quickly as the door closed behind Mary Bayard, the girl came close to the desk, pointing at the inter-com box. "If you're going to keep that thing turned on so somebody can listen to everything I say—"

Don cut the switch. "It's off. Try it yourself."

"I wouldn't know whether you're foxing me or not, so I'll have to trust you."

"Guess you will." He waited.

She perched on the corner of the desk, careless of the exposure of a nyloned knee. "I can't tell you why it's so important for me to keep my identity secret, except that if my—my family found out I'd been arrested, I might as well kill myself."

"Married?" Don recognized her perfume as one of the more expensive French imports carried by Nimblett's.

"No." She squirmed so her skirt pulled up to show a bit of ivory thigh. "If you'll just take my word it was all meant as a bit of silly ribbing. I'll do anything you want me to." She leaned over, put out a hand to touch his, caressingly. "Anything," she repeated. "I'll give you my address and you can come up to my apartment tonight, so we can talk it over."

He smiled. "That's a most entertaining idea—but I'm afraid this has gone a bit beyond my personal inclinations. Anyhow, how could I be sure you aren't just kidding me along, to get out of trouble?"

She made a pretense of pulling her skirt down a little. "You could come home with me right now if you want to."

"You make it sound interesting." He reached for her handbag. "If you're willing to go that far, there's no reason why you shouldn't tell me your name."

She had misunderstood his movement, apparently thinking he had intended to put his hand on her knee. As soon as his fingers closed on the handle of the bag, she seized it with both hands and slid off the desk to her feet.

"I'm Sally Collins," she said swiftly. "I live at Sixty-eight East Seventy-ninth. Apartment Five. Regent 2-0917. Please don't tear my bag!"

He kept his grip on the alligator-leather contraption, stood up and stepped around the desk toward her.

"Look," he said, "We might be able to arrive at some deal to keep you out of court. But in order to do that we'll have to know all about you. To protect ourselves against any repetition of this charge coin use."

"I swear by everything I hold dear I'll never do it again!"

She wrestled for the bag, brushing close against him. Her mouth was provocatively near, her lime-green eyes wide with anticipation.

He pried her fingers loose from the handle. "Let's have a look at those color swatches you were matching those fabrics with."

He opened the bag. She lunged, slapped at the bag, knocked its contents to the floor.

Don held out a hand to keep her off, bent down to retrieve the scattered conglomeration—comb, compact, billfold, keys, coin purse, checkbook.

She raced to the door, yanked it open, rushed through the outer office.

He straightened up in time to see Mary Bayard seize the fleeing girl as she reached the door to the corridor. It wouldn't be the first time Mary had blocked an escape in just that fashion. She had proved herself so often, in that connection, that cute little Cora Session, Don's secretary at her desk out there, didn't feel it necessary to leave her typewriter to help.

The girl wrenched open the corridor door, struggling wildly as the muscular Miss Bayard tussled with her. They lurched through the doorway to the corridor. The girl screamed.

Don saw Mary Bayard fling up her hands, reel sideways against the door frame and crumple to the floor beyond his line of vision.

Cora cried sharply, "Mr. Marko—quick!"

He ran through the outer office as the corridor door slammed. He shoved at it, but something outside was preventing it from opening. It took a good shoulder heave to push the obstruction back.

Mary Bayard was sprawled unconscious on the floor of the corridor. It had been her dead weight that had held the door. The girl had vanished.

FIFTEEN feet further along, where the corridor made an L turn by the stair-well one of Nimblett's middle-aged executives knelt, huddled against the wall. He held both hands to his mouth. Blood gushed from his nose, ribboning down over his hands, his chin, his shirt front. He goggled in fright at Don Marko, took one hand away from his mouth long enough to mumble,

"He went downstairs!"

Don reached the stair door, tugged it open, leaned over to peer down. There was no one in sight, but the girl could have kept close to the wall going down. Yet there was no sound of clip-clopping Cuban heels.

He ran back to Mary Bayard. Cora was squatting beside the plainclothes woman. "She's breathing, Mr. Marko."

Don stooped, saw the lump on the back of Mary Bayard's head just above the tightly coiled bun of dark hair. "Knocked out! Call the hospital. Tell one of our nurses to hop down here fast. Don't move Miss Bayard till the nurse gets here."

The middle-aged man stumbled to his feet. "Did he kill her?" he muttered through a blood-stained handkerchief.

"Knocked her out, Ralph."

Don had known the mousy little man since he'd first come to Nimblett's. Ralph Eddrop, assistant credit manager, hadn't aged or changed a particle in all the intervening years. He was short, inclined to be pudgy, pale, and colorless of speech and manner as well as of complexion. He'd always been the punctual and painstaking, shy and shrinking timid-soul type, but Nimblett's thought a great deal of Ralph's judgment as to charge accounts and delinquent balances.

Ralph took the handkerchief away from his mouth and examined it with horrified

astonishment. "He tried his best to knock me out, too. But I thought it was only a newspaper he had in his hand, so when I saw him attack Miss Bayard, I tried to grab him. He hit me with a perfectly terrific blow right in the mouth." The credit man felt of his teeth. "It felt like a mule kick."

Don saw a rolled newspaper lying against the wall halfway to the turn of the corridor. "Why'd you say 'he'? It was a girl, wasn't it?" The newspaper had been rolled around a footlong piece of heavy iron pipe.

Ralph's forehead crinkled into a puzzled scowl. "There *was* a girl, but I thought that man was about to strike her, too, Don. She ran right past me before I tried to grab the big brute."

"What'd he look like?"

Ralph snuffled blood back into his nose. "Like a butcher. Big fellow, face like ground hamburger. Six feet, heavy-shouldered. Had on one of those Army trench coats. Couldn't see what he was wearing. But I could spot him out of a thousand. Had little rolls of fat under his eyes—like pouches that'd bloated out. Did he get away from you?"

Don said, "I never saw him, Ralph. The girl got away from me."

"What the devil was he doing up here on the executive floor? How'd he get up here?"

"Might have come up to see what we were going to do about the girl."

Ralph groaned, touching his swollen upper lip. "Was just coming back from the washroom and heard a girl scream. When I poked my head around the corner there I saw this big lunk flailing away at Miss Bayard. He had his back to me so I couldn't see his face, and for a minute I thought possibly he was one of your men having trouble helping Miss Bayard with a shoplifter. So I didn't holler for help. Then he spun around and came right for me like a crazy man. Good Lord, I hope he didn't hurt Miss Bayard seriously."

A starchily-uniformed nurse hurried along the corridor.

Don was on the telephone to his main entrance guard when Cora touched his arm.

"The nurse says it looks like a fractured skull and might be critical. She wants to get Mary to a hospital right away."

DON'S eyes clouded. "You go in the ambulance with her, Cora. I'll ring Doc Towbin at the clinic and see to it everything's ready soon's she gets there."

He thought a lot of Mary Bayard. If things went wrong up there on the operating table at the clinic, he would be partly to blame. Because he'd thought he might talk that blonde into making a confession, and hadn't considered the possibility she might have an accomplice here with her.

He'd had his fingers on something important and had let it get away from him!

Perhaps not entirely away, though. He picked up the rest of the stuff that had tumbled out of the girl's bag, arranged it on his blotter.

The last thing he recovered from beneath his desk, where it had fluttered, was a newspaper clipping with large black type flaunting the name Deshla.

Chapter IV

DATED the ninth of March, twelve days past, the clipping read:

CORPSE FOUND ON ROOF OF BURNED MANOR

Famous Deshla House Razed
By Fire After Lightning Strikes
Body of Mystery Woman
Discovered by Volunteer
Fireman on Watch Roof

Georgetown, Md., AP: Volunteer firemen from the Sassafras River V.F.D. discovered a body in the blackened wreckage of the old Deshla mansion, destroyed by fire following a severe electrical storm here today. Coroner Joseph G. Ashford stated that the remains were those of a young woman, but could give no estimate of the time of death since buzzards or rodents had stripped the bones of flesh. The skeleton was not noticed by members of the Volunteer Fire Brigade until the square portion of the roof collapsed and fell through the burned-out floors to the ground. Police have so far been unable to find anyone who could identify the woman or suggest how she had obtained entrance to the historic old homestead which had been unoccupied by the Deshla family for several months.

Don lifted his blotter, took from beneath it the furniture section's report on the Deshla mess. He knew it pretty well by heart, but he wanted to verify the dates.

On the fifth of March a young woman representing herself to be Mrs. Cephas Deshla of Georgetown, Maryland, ordered and had charged to the Deshla account furniture and floor coverings to the amount of \$17,-822.94. She had presented a credit token stamped with Mrs. Deshla's name and had submitted a list of items prepared for her by the firm of Yates & Gordon, Interior Decorators of Chestertown, Maryland. The furniture section had been unable to locate any such concern.

He juggled the Betterson credit coin on his palm gloomily. The girl in the Deshla fraud couldn't have been the blonde who had just escaped. The furniture buyer had described the other woman as being tall, statuesque, patrician in appearance and manner. But the points of similarity in the gyp scheme were too noticeable to leave any doubt that Mary Bayard had managed to nip another tricky theft in the bud—and might pay for it with her life.

Don Marko examined the Betterson credit coin with a magnifying glass. It bore every mark of being genuine, including the small speck of darker metal on the reverse side, put there to confound possible counterfeiters. Every Nimblett's section manager and assistant had been trained to watch for that apparent defect on the coin. If some clever duplicator was at work turning out imitations of the Nimblett's charge coin he had been well posted by someone on the store's staff.

The things that had dropped out of the blonde's handbag were such as might be found in the possession of any girl of the upper brackets. The compact was studded with a scroll pattern in chip diamonds. The key case was engraved "S.C." Maybe her name really was Sally Collins.

The phone book, however, listed no S. Collins at the East Seventy-ninth Street address. He dialed the Regent number, got a "What numbah are you calling, puhlease?" in answer. A query to Information brought the reply that no Sally or Sarah Collins was listed in the Manhattan, Bronx, Queens or Richmond directories, or in any of the exchanges in those boroughs.

He thumbed through the stubs of the girl's

pocket checkbook. It bore the imprint of the Traders Exchange Bank and most of the scribbled entries on the stubs were for small sums:

\$27.50—to Dabney's, shoes
\$31.00—Martha Lewis, lingerie
\$14.65—Chez Moisson, n'tgown

Only one entry was for more than fifty dollars—\$200—C. He thought about that for a while, got up, pulled on his topcoat.

He called up Maxie, his pickpocket specialist covering the escalator at the second floor.

"Sit in for me here, couple hours, Maxie. Get Chet to double for your spot. I'm going out. Just keep things nice and quiet."

The main building of the Traders Exchange Bank was ten blocks north, but there were branches all over town. It might be a tough job to run down one blonde by means of a few stubs on a relatively small account. Yet it seemed the best chance. The G.M. had been vehement about not calling in the police on any of this credit coin fraud, lest word get around and other confidence operators be tempted to use the same method.

ONE of the vice-presidents at the bank had been sympathetic but not too helpful. He had showed the stubs to his paying tellers and given them Don's description of the good-looking blonde, but no one seemed to recognize the writing or the description. All Don got was a list of the thirty-one branches.

He called the clinic, got Cora, and asked about Mary Bayard.

"She's just come out of the operating room, Mr. Marko," Cora told him. "They think she'll pull through but it was a mighty close thing. They said if it hadn't been for her hair-bun deflecting the blow, she'd have been dead by now."

"He tried to kill her, all right. Stay with her, Cora. Maxie's on the desk. You might call him every hour or so. He'll be like a cat on a hot stove if he gets any tough ones to handle, standing in for me."

"What are you up to?"

"That blonde told me to come on-a her house, she'd give-a me *everything*. I'm going to try and keep the date."

"Watch out you don't land on a hospital cot instead of a studio couch, Mr. Marko. I'm scared of that she-cat and the wild man who tried to murder Mary."

He soothed her. "I'm just gumshoeing around. If there's any strong-arming to do, I'll holler cop, don't worry."

"I will, too, worry."

"Okay. Worry about Marv." He hung up, reached for the telephone directory.

Dabney's was on Broadway at Sixtieth. Chez Moisson was on Columbus at Seventy-first. It seemed reasonable that "S.C." would do her shopping in the neighborhood where she banked.

The nearest branch of the Traders Exchange was at Seventy-fourth and Broadway. He used his Nimbletts identification card, mentioned the vice-president at the main bank. An assistant cashier was impressed.

"If you'd ask the teller in your A to M window to come here a minute," Don suggested, "it might save some time."

The paying teller was summoned.

Don described the girl, produced the checkbook stubs. "I'd guess her initials were S.C., though that may be a mile off the mark. Anyhow, you'd remember her if she's been in here much. She looks like important people, real upper crust."

The teller looked like a dried-up winter apple with a bad taste in his mouth. Nevertheless he knew his stuff.

"I hesitate to say definitely," he murmured, "but I'm inclined to think this is Miss Collinson's writing."

"Bingo," Don said. "She told us it was Collins. Sally Collins."

"Miss Collinson's name, I believe, is Suzanne," the teller replied diffidently. "And as you put it, she does look like important people."

"Where's she live?"

"I'll get her ledger card for you, sir."

The card read:

Collins, Suzanne,
619 West 74th St., LOrraine 8-6217.

Don said, "Thanks a million."

He rang the store, got Maxie. "I'm on the track of that conniving blonde who tried

to put over a fast one on the drapery section," he said, and gave Maxie the address. "Just in case I run into something like Mary did."

Maxie said, "Watch ya step, Chief. Hell is busting loose in a great big way."

"Something new has been added?"

"Floor Coverings comes up with a charge of 7,800 bucks for Orientals, shipped to some guy over in Red Bank—he ain't even been in the country for six months."

"Same setup? Credit coin? Snappy dame?"

"Yep. A redhead that would make General Sherman get down off his horse, Floor Coverings claims. The G.M. has been bellying his brains out for you, too."

"Tell him I'm not at Toots Shor's lapping up liquor, will you? I'll check back, soon's I have something."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for ya, Chief."

THE house on West Seventy-fourth was a former residence that had been converted into four apartments. The name "S. Collinson" was on the card beneath the bell for Apartment Three.

He rang the bell. No answer.

The third key in her keytainer opened the front door. He climbed stairs into musty gloom, listened at the door of Apartment 3. Again, silence.

The first key opened the door. The little foyer was dark; the shades in the apartment were drawn. An odor of onions came up the stair-well. The sound of driving rain against the windows was depressing.

He went in, groping for the light switch. He touched it, clicked it on. There was no responsive blaze of lights.

From a shadowy doorway at his left a cheerful voice said, "That's a dud switch. The one that works is up higher. Yeah, put your hands up higher. That's right. Just keep 'em up there, that's the ticket."

Don's eyes became sufficiently accustomed to the gloom to make out the glinting twin-barrels of a shotgun, the muzzle a yard from his belt buckle. The steadiness with which it was held and pointed decided him to do what the man who held it said.

Chapter V

CCROSSLY, Don said, "What's the sense getting nasty about it? I was invited to come here, you know."

The man chuckled. "Just the trouble. I never did like to get two-timed. Face the wall there. Keep the claws up. Look at the ceiling. That's the ticket."

The thick muzzle prodded Don in the small of the back. It felt like the corner of a coffin poking him.

"Guess you've got Suzanne wrong," Don said. "She and I had a little business to talk over, that's all."

The man sniggered. "Yeah, yeah. I know the kind of business you'd have with her. Not that I blame you. March along into the next room there. I'll give you a little light so you won't break your neck." Bulbs glowed suddenly behind butter-yellow sconces on the walls of a long studio. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you until she gets here. Keep the chin high, bud."

The rug beneath Don's shoes felt like inch-thick moss. What he could see of the room was magnificently furnished. At the far end of the room a high Norman fireplace of stone with a wide slate mantel gave the impression of an altar before which were arranged twin semicircular sofas done in white leather. A coffee table of black and white marble carved to represent an artist's palette stood between the sofas and the delicate black tracery of wrought-iron fire dogs.

Tables and heavy iron chairs of the Norman persuasion were mixed in with a few modern pieces—a low sofa, bookcases. The walls were decorated with dozens of water colors, charcoal sketches, a few oils in bleached wood frames. Some of the charcoals were nudes. Don thought one of them was an excellent, if somewhat obscene likeness of the blonde.

"Over there," the man growled. "On that couch. Beside the bookcase there. That's it. Lie down on it. On your belly. Turn your head toward the wall. That's the ticket. Just stay that way. Don't try to look around. Then maybe you won't get hurt."

Don gauged his chances of making a

break. They didn't seem so good with that muzzle at his spine.

He wondered, Is it possible this guy doesn't know why I'm here? Could be I simply crashed in on a jealous boy friend who thinks she'd planned to give him the crisscross. Well, she had done that, in a way. But if this is jealous business, I'd better get the snafu cleared up fast—before that shotgun begins to smoke.

Aloud he said, "You don't think I'd be fathead enough to come up here without notifying my office, do you?"

"Ho!" The man laughed derisively. "Now you're going to come up with that oldie about being an F.B.I. or a T-man. Go on, build it up. It'll be strictly for laughs, but I don't mind. We got to do something until Sue gets here."

"Wallet in my hip pocket," Don answered sourly. "Look in there. Cards'll tell you who I am."

"Don't give a damn who you are. You sneak into my apartment. You claim you had an invitation from my girl. You're going to stay here until she shows up. Until I find out what kind of kadoodling she had in mind when she asked you here."

"Your girl got nabbed in an attempt to get away with twelve hundred dollars worth of merchandise from the store I work for. Then she staged a getaway." Don found it hard to talk with his head twisted at right angles to his body. "There'll be descriptions of her on every police teletype from here to Philadelphia by now. If the cops get her before I have a chance to talk to her, she'll really have her tail in a crack with the door slamming. If I can talk to her, I might make a deal with her. The police won't."

"Hell, in that case"—the man chuckled—"I might turn her in myself, if there's any reward. I wouldn't want sentiment to stand in the way of making an easy dollar."

Don heard the key in the lock.

The man heard it, too, but he waited until the hall door had opened before he called, "Come on in, honey. Got a li'l surprise for you."

Heels clicked hastily across the foyer, then their sound was smothered by the thick carpeting.

"For heaven's sake, Clem! Who's that? What you doing with that shotgun!" It was the blonde's voice. She sounded rattled.

THE man answered pleasantly enough, "Getting ready to give an exhibition of fancy pigeon-nicking, Sue. One'll get you ten if you think it'll be the first time a pigeon's had all its feathers stripped off without being blown to ribbons."

"What kind of double-talk is that!" Suzanne sounded frightened. "You know who that fellow on the couch is?"

Don said, "I told him. He doesn't buy it. He thinks I came up here to pile in bed with you." He made a movement to turn his head.

"Don't try it," Clem warned him agreeably. "I'd have to scrape your brains off that period wallpaper. Let's put it this way. You're here, mister. And she's here. Neither of you figured on *my* being here. That's about the size of it. Now, far be it from me to play the spoil-sport. You're going to go right ahead as if I weren't here at all."

Suzanne caught her breath sharply. "Clem! What's the matter with you? This man Marko knows all about the Betterson order. He might find out about the others, too, and—"

"Less talk," Clem cut her off curtly. "More action. Get those feathers off, my pigeon."

"Wha-a-at?" She was clearly stunned with terror.

"Take your clothes off, my beautiful." Clem was less affable. "Get ready to give the fella what you promised him."

Her voice shook. "You must be off your rocker!"

"Undress. Strip. Now." All the banter was gone from Clem's tone. The words had a whip's lash. "Don't stall. Don't argue. Take your clothes off! Or I'll shoot 'em off!"

"Clem!" she pleaded. "Clem, I don't even *know* the man! I told you—"

"I'll count to ten." The whip-crack words were harsher. "If you don't have your skirt off by then . . ."

She moaned, and Don heard her coat drop to the floor, heard the zipper on her

skirt come open. He found his face wet with sudden sweat. The guy must be nuts!

The hooks unsnapped on her blouse. Would it be his turn next, Don wondered, to satisfy this lunatic's peculiar jealousy? Or was it something more sinister than jealousy?

Don heard the snap of the elastic. A prickly sensation crawled around the back of his neck.

"Okay, Sue," Clem said. "Now get over there. Lie down. Beside him."

"No! I will not!" The fear had gone from her voice. In its place was a dull hopelessness.

Don slid his right palm against the wall, bracing himself to shove the couch away from the wall and get leverage enough to roll out of the way of the shotgun blast if it came.

"Listen, you," he said angrily, "I don't know how far you think you can carry this gag, but I'll tell you! Not a damn bit further as far as I'm—"

He gave a mighty heave. The couch slid away from the wall only six inches or so but he got enough purchase to roll and hit the floor on hands and knees as the gun roared. He had a smoke-blurred glimpse of the girl's nakedness, a snapshot glimpse of a tall, slim figure swinging up the shiny barrels. A face masked with a red triangle of bandanna. Slitted eye-holes, short-cropped, carrotty hair.

He dived for the man's knees, one hand flung out and up to seize the shotgun. His ears rang thunderously, exploded. A tremendous concussion knocked him sideways. The red mask and the ivory-and-blond nakedness dissolved beneath blinding waves of unbearable brilliance.

Chapter VI

HE WAS living through one of the nerve-shattering nightmares of his flight training days—coming in to the field too low on his solo, trying to zoom her up too quickly, going into one of those sickening spins, whirling helplessly, faster and faster, tautening his muscles for the crash that would mash him into a shapeless pulp.

He thrust forward on the stick in one last spasm of effort to pull out of the spin. The controls were rigid, immovable. He forced himself to open his eyes. The "stick" was the double-barreled shotgun. He lay face down, with long blonde hair beneath his mouth.

The fireplace revolved dizzily. The sketches and paintings tilted away from him nauseatingly, swung back over him like the side of a wallowing ship. The noise of the prop wash continued—deafening, paralyzing in its intensity.

Slowly, painfully, he pushed himself up to hands and knees. The naked girl lay face down on the oyster-white carpet beside him, one knee drawn up beneath her, both hands under her stomach. The only visible sign of a wound was the glistening red ribbon circling her right forearm where her body rested against it.

Her forehead touched the thick carpeting so her neck seemed to be arched up. There was a twitching at her throat.

She was alive! She was trying to say something!

Don thought it would be futile to try to hear anything other than the thunderous roaring within his own head, but he put his ear down close to her mouth.

"What?" He was startled at the far-away sound of his own voice. "Say it again!"

"Benny." The voice was surprisingly strong.

"Yes? What about him?"

Sue's shoulders quivered. "Tell Benny—pay off—Clem—for this." The shoulders sagged.

Don stumbled to his feet, steadying himself against the bookcase. He could focus his eyes only by squinting. It was some seconds before he was even able to spot the telephone, yards away on a small table in the foyer.

He couldn't have seen the numbers on the dial clearly enough to ring a particular number, but he felt for the last hole on the disc, twirled it.

"Police—emergency!" he said when the operator answered.

"Who is this calling?"

"Collinson." He made a mighty effort of concentration. "Lorraine 8-6217. Hurry it up, will you?"

When the bored voice of the desk sergeant announced, "Headquarters," Don rattled off:

"Can you get an ambulance over to 619 West Seventy-fourth in a rush? Been an accident."

"What's the trouble, there, mister?"

"Been shot—bleeding to death. Hurry, or it'll be too late!"

Don slammed down the receiver in numbed disbelief. Looking down at the phone, he'd noticed his bare legs. His pants had been taken off! He looked at his arms. All he wore was his shorts and socks!

That murdering maniac in the bandanna mask had stripped Don of his raincoat, coat, vest, trousers, shirt, undershirt and shoes.

Other things beside the objects in the studio began to come into focus now. The killer had planned the whole setup neatly, getting the girl to undress, shooting her, knocking Don for a loop and then peeling him to his underwear so the police would find them as if there had been what the French called "a crime of passion!"

Wouldn't that make a nice, stinking trap! Don had told Cora this poor kid on the carpet had invited him up to her place, and he'd told her he was going up to accept the invitation. Of course it had been kidding on his part, and Cora had known it, but it would sound lousy if a prosecutor should force her to repeat it on the witness stand.

Then there would be plenty of nasty talk about the odd way this Suzanne had managed to escape from his office. It wouldn't be too hard to get a jury to believe he'd let her get away on purpose.

He pulled his pants on, shoved his feet into his shoes. His fingers wouldn't coordinate enough to tie the laces.

HE REELED unsteadily into the kitchen-dinette. On top of the ice box were two liquor bottles, one of Fundador, the other a Rhine wine. He grabbed the brandy, pulled the cork with his teeth, gulped half a tumblerful straight from the bottle. It stung and choked him, but it cleared his

brain a little.

He took the brandy back to the living room. The girl's neck was no longer arched. Her mouth was pressed flat against the carpet. Beside the arm with the glistening circlet a creeping crimson stained the oyster-white of the carpet from her shoulder to her slender waist.

She was gone; there wouldn't be anything more he could do to help her here. If he didn't get out of here in a few minutes, he'd probably get himself in an ugly jam, too. That sadist wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of staging what would have appeared to be a lovers' quarrel without notifying the authorities himself. There'd be a squad car around before the ambulance got here, in all probability.

He shouldered into his raincoat, slapped on his wet hat, gathered coat, vest, shirt and tie into a bundle. He wined the barrel of the shotgun with his undershirt. The bending over made him retchingly ill. He might need another slug of that brandy, he decided, and stuffed the bottle in his pocket.

He looked down at Suzanne. "I'll try to pass on your message to Benny, kid. If I can find him."

He used the undershirt on the knob of the hall door, inside and out, and tucked the bundle of clothes under his coat as he went down the stairs, half expecting one of the tenants on the other floors to fling open a door and confront him.

It was still raining when he reached the street. It would be difficult to get a taxi in a storm like this. A horn blasted insistently eastward. Its volume rose higher as it neared.

He crossed the street, walked toward the river, so his back would be toward the arriving police. But he made himself turn as the patrol car whined to a stop a hundred yards behind him. Cops would think it queer if a passerby should pay no attention to a racing police car.

That would be one of the precinct patrol cars, the one Clem had arranged for, no doubt. Don hesitated long enough to watch the two officers run up the steps. Then he lowered his head against the driving rain and plodded slowly on to the corner.

Wouldn't he have presented a picture of fleeing guilt if those uniformed boys had decided to pick him up! Bare to the waist, carrying his shirt and coat, a bottle of looted liquor in his pocket! And a swollen left ear that felt like an eggplant and probably looked like one!

Taxis streamed past on Seventy-second, but they were all full. He thought of taking a bus, then decided the subway would be safer. At the "Telegrill" near Broadway he turned in, headed past the lineup at the long bar to the stag's room.

He went into one of the toilet booths, hung up his raincoat, put on his undershirt, shirt, tie, vest and coat. Then he took a slug from the *Fundador* bottle.

A small painted label caught his eye as he lowered the uptilted bottle from his mouth. He examined it:

Sammy's Package Store
Everything From A Cork To A Cask
At Lower Prices
On 9W—Congers, New York

He knew Congers. It was the sort of small town where a liquor dealer would know his regular customers. Of course there was the big probability the bottle had been bought while somebody's car was en route up or down the Hudson. It was also likely enough the brandy had been bought by Suzanne herself. But there was still the outside chance Clem had bought it and that Sammy, or one of his employees, might know who Clem was.

Don went to the washbowl, looked at his puffed-up ear in the mirror. He didn't give the ear a second thought when he saw the scratches on his right cheek.

The sort of scratches that might have been made by a girl's fingernails! Even the fingernails of a dying girl—if somebody else had clawed them against Don's face.

Chapter VII

IN THE subway down to Christopher Street, Don stood on the platform of the rear car of the local pretending to read a damp newspaper so no one would be likely to notice those scratches on his face. If Clem had done what Don thought he had, the lab technicians down at Broome Street

would presently be suggesting to the Homicide specialists that they put out a bulletin to be on the lookout for a man displaying marks of feminine fury.

Quite likely someone in the houses along Seventy-fourth Street who had been looking out a window when the patrol car had rolled up, would by now have given the police his description, anyway. For that matter, Clem might have telephoned his description to the cops when sending in the alarm which had brought the radio car.

The doorman at his apartment house was busy blowing his whistle for a taxi. He didn't notice as Don stalked into the building. The elevator man was descending from one of the upper floors. Don didn't wait for the car. He met no one on the stairs or in the corridor of his floor.

He shucked his clothes, stood under a hot shower for five full minutes while his ear throbbed and hammered like an abscess. Then he let the cold water stun him. When he looked in his mirror the scratches seemed more vividly prominent than before, but the swollen ear had been reduced a little.

He had one more shot at the Fundador before he sat down in his bathrobe to call the office.

It was Cora who answered. "Oh, Lord, Mr. Marko! When're you coming back? The most awful thing—"

"Mary?"

"No. She's still on the critical list, but they think she'll be all right. It's Mr. Harrison!"

"Maxie told me."

"They've found another phony delivery, Mr. Marko. To the Stuyvesant Binns! For nine thousand!"

"Oh, great! What was it—furniture?"

"And curtains and mirrors and light fixtures. Mr. Harrison is throwing a Grade A fit. He's been calling for you every fifteen minutes!"

"Switch me over to him, Cora." After what he'd been through, the G.M.'s bellowings wouldn't bother Don too much.

Bob Harrison wasn't in a bellowing mood. He was in a cold, quiet rage. "Where are you, Don?"

"Downtown." He was purposely vague.

"I want you here in my office as fast as you can get here.

"No can do, Boss. I'm riding a hot lead on the Deshla thing."

"Deshla!" the G.M. snorted. "It's a half-dozen swindles by now and God knows how many more to come! Do you realize this thing is getting up toward the fifty thousand mark! We've got to put a stop to it, if it means shaking up the entire protection staff, understand?"

"Perfectly. But it might mean going even higher."

Harrison fumed. "What do you mean by that?"

"These things had to be inside jobs, partly. From what I'm onto right now, I'd say there's quite a crew involved—and one or more of 'em will turn out to be Nimblett's employees."

"Then get back here, damn it, and—"

"Can't, Bob. There's more than our loss to take into consideration."

"Yes, yes. I know all about Miss Bayard and Ralph Eddrop. Unfortunate."

"Murder's generally very inconvenient, Boss."

"Murder?"

"Couple of dead girls, so far. Both members of the con crowd, near's I can make out. Might be more if I don't stick with this."

"What have you find out?"

"Bit here. Piece there. Seem's as if some interior decorator has been getting inside dope on some of our heavy-dough customers who've gone away for winter vacations, got stuff shipped to their country places, then transferred it elsewhere. Leaving no trace except a bunch of unpaid bills."

"Who do you suspect here in the store?"

"Haven't got to that yet. But you might have someone with discretion in the credit department check over all the charges billed out by the furniture and drapery departments for the past sixty days and make a list of the ones that haven't been paid to date."

"Eddrop be all right? He's absolutely trustworthy."

"Sure. He'll have his heart in it, too, after that crack in the mouth."

HARRISON was subdued. "When'll you be in, Don?"

"No telling. But I'll have something when I get there."

"I hope to heaven. These murders—they'll bring in the police?"

"Sure. I'll try to keep Nimblets from being involved too much, Bob."

He phoned his garage, ordered his car. By the time the doorman called up to say it was at the curb, Don was dressed.

Once over the George Washington Bridge, streaking northward on Route 9W, he began to mull over the question of Benny. The guy was evidently someone Suzanne had depended on—likely the big lunk Eddrop had described as having slugged him and Mary Bayard. But if that was the case, the chances were that Benny was on Nimblets's payroll. Only someone who knew the store well, the location of the store protection office and the stairs close by it, could have staged that assault and getaway. It would have been difficult enough for anyone to get in the executive corridor, with that watchful receptionist at the entrance.

The rain lessened, but the clouds were still low and threatening by three o'clock when he parked in front of the General Greene Hotel just off the main highway at the Congers crossroad. A hundred yards to the west, on the intersecting blacktop, he saw a green neon:

SAMMY'S
WINES, LIQUORS, BEER

He went in the hotel, consulted the thin phone book. There were only a few pages devoted to Congers, so it took no more than five minutes to run down the list. But he found no one whose first name was Clement.

A dime connected him with Sammy's Package Store. He spoke loudly, as if he'd been doing all right with a bottle.

"Hey, Sammy, sen' up couple bottles that Spanish brandy, will ya?"

"Yes, sir. Right away. Who's this?"

"Oh, ha-ha. I'm callin' f'r Clem. Y'know. Clem."

"Oh. Okay. Two Fundador, right away."
"Attakeed."

He was behind the wheel of his car when a motorcycle with a sidecar whooshed out

of the hidden driveway beyond Sammy's, heading west on the intersection.

The motorcyclist drove like a bat, was out of sight around a curve before Don could get his car up to speed. But he picked the motorcyclist up on the straightaway, a quarter-mile beyond.

A winking red eye and a clanging gong warned of an approaching train at the crossing two hundred yards ahead. The motorcycle bounced across the track boards at seventy. Don had to slam on his brakes as the express thundered into the crossing.

The tires of the sidecar left clear marks on the wet blacktop. If the delivery vehicle didn't swing off onto some concrete road, Don ought to be able to follow those marks even if he didn't catch up to the fellow.

It was like trailing a hippopotamus across Central Park. The tracks continued for another half-mile, swung off at a right angle on a wide gravel road beside which was a reflector-marker; "Ayerell." The tracks went in but didn't come back.

Don drove on for another mile, turned, took his time returning to the marker. If "Ayerell" was Clem, there was the likelihood the murderer would be on his guard now that he knew someone had sent him a phony order of brandy. There was a certain poetic justice in using that method to trace a man who specialized in having stuff shipped to someone who hadn't purchased it, Don thought grimly.

There were new marks on the gravel and on the wet tar showing where the sidecar had gone back to Sammy's.

Don drove down the graveled way.

White-railed fences began to hem in the roadway. This must be quite an estate, Don thought. Big lawns clotted with groves of elm and oak. A huge Quonset hut back there across the plowed field. Evidently Mr. Ayerell was a gentleman farmer of sorts.

Around a bend the white fences came together at a pair of concrete gate posts with a Kentucky lift gate barring the way. At one side a large white square bore neat black scroll lettering:

Jerome Clement Ayerell
Antiques—Interiors—Designing

Don stopped the car, reached out, pulled

the hanging cord. The wooden gate swung open. He drove through. The gate closed behind him slowly.

AHEAD was a huge rambling white Colonial farmhouse flanked by sheds, garages, tool houses. No smoke rose from any of the four chimneys, nor were there any tire marks on the driveway except those Don recognized as the motorcyclist's.

He pulled up in front of a long, low glassed-in porch, honked twice, waited.

No one came out. As far as he could tell, there was no movement at any of the curtained windows.

He unlocked the glove compartment, took out his .38, checked the load, thumbed off the safety.

If there were to be any fireworks this time, he would do the touching off himself.

He walked cautiously around behind the closed garage to the rear of the house. The only thing that caught his eye was a small piece of torn yellow cardboard in the mud of the walk from the tool-shed to the kitchen. He picked it up, knowing what he would find printed on it before he turned it over:

IMBLETT'S
e Great Store

It was the kind of shipping tag used on crated furniture and cumbersome carpets.

Chapter VIII

THE DRIVEWAY that circled the farmhouse to the garage continued on past the tool shed toward the Quonset hut. It was a deeply rutted driveway, as if heavy trucks had cut their signatures in the gravel.

Don went back to his car, drove the quarter-mile to the hangarlike structure. It didn't seem reasonable that thirty or forty thousand dollars worth of furniture and floor coverings would be stored in the farmhouse; and the garage certainly wasn't big enough to hold any great part of that amount. But the Quonset could take all the furniture on Nimblett's eighth floor and everything in the big Brooklyn warehouse as well.

The double-doors to the metal hut were

locked, as he'd expected. The windows were tightly shuttered.

He hacked his car a hundred yards, came forward again straight for the doors, bracing himself for the impact. An instant before he crashed the bumper against the building, he cut the ignition.

The doors burst open, the car rolling right into the hut before he braked it to a stop.

If there *was* anyone around the place, he thought—some caretaker or servant—that crash ought to bring him a-running. He got out, inspected the damage to his car. A mashed left fender, a cracked headlight, the bumper slightly askew.

The end of the high-arched shed into which he'd come like a projectile was fitted up as a paint shop. Electric sprayers and spray shields, an overhead trolley for suspending articles to be sprayed from beneath. Racks of brushes. Enough paint, oil finishes, waxes and varnishes to equip a hardware store. The floor hoarding was spattered with cream and buff, white and apple green, blues and chocolates.

Beyond were piled crates of furniture, long burlapped bundles of carpets. Wooden mirror-cases were stacked against cardboard cartons of lighting fixtures and drapery hardware. There were no tags on any of the stuff. The black paint with which the consignee's name had been marked on the casings had been sanded or planed off. But he recognized some of the items of the Deshla shipment. There was no doubt this was where Clem had cached the loot from Nimblett's.

The next step would be simple. Call Bob Harrison and put it up to him. From here in it would be a job for the local sheriff or the state troopers. The stuff couldn't be claimed or taken away from here without a warrant.

Tires made a sucking sound on the mud of the fenced-in lane. He ran to the door. A maroon convertible was coming in toward the house. There was a girl at the wheel; she seemed to be alone. Only the accident of Don's car being inside the Quonset hut kept her from noticing that there was an uninvited guest on the Ayerell farm.

He waited until she'd driven up by the

porch, then went out, swinging the big double-doors shut, hiding his car completely. Either she would be ringing the doorbell and, finding no one at home, would go away, or else she would be letting herself into the house with a key Clem had given her. Maybe she was Mrs. Jerome Clement Ayerell.

He walked without haste back toward the garage. For a considerable part of the distance to the farmhouse he would be shielded from anyone looking out the rear windows. Even if she did see him, she'd assume he was someone who lived nearby—unless she'd noticed the marks of his tires.

Her car didn't come into view again. She couldn't have waited all this time; she must be inside the house.

Cautiously he walked around the garage to the porch, keeping on the grass as much as he could to prevent his shoes from making a squashing in the muddy gravel. There was no one in the car. The front door was closed.

He moved quietly to the porch, opened the front door as noiselessly as he could manage. She was talking to someone. After listening a moment it became apparent to him she was speaking over the phone.

"—I got two on the Clipper out of Miami for Rio, but there wasn't anything open for Miami until day after tomorrow. . . . Well, I didn't ask about a charter job, Clem. I didn't think you'd want to go to that expense."

DON edged in silently. He could see part way into a large Colonial living room with white woodwork, bright chintz-covered rocking chairs, rag rugs, a rose-brick fireplace.

"—well, all right, darling. But aren't you coming up here at all? . . . Yes, I'll do the best I can about packing, but—"

Don closed the door behind him. It made a tiny click as it shut.

"Clem, listen! There's someone here in the house! I just heard the front door—Oh!"

Don leaned negligently against the lintel of the living room door. "Go right on. Don't mind me."

She let the receiver clatter back on the

handset, started to get up out of the antique ladder-back chair.

"What do you want?"

Her voice was low and husky like that of a blues singer. The voice matched her sultry beauty. She was a redhead with a short snub nose and a wide, full-lipped sensuous mouth. She wore a tight-fitting black sweater and a gray suede leather skirt. Her long-lashed eyes were so heavily shadowed with mascara that she gave an impression of voluptuous dissipation.

"You Mrs. Ayerell?" He made no effort to hide the gun.

"Yes." She took the trouble to adjust her small, fur-trimmed cloche hat and pull the sweater down tightly enough to outline the full breasts. "Who are you?"

"I'm a life-saver, far as you're concerned." He guessed this would be the redhead Maxie had mentioned as having executed the Red Bank swindle for seventy-eight hundred bucks worth of Oriental rugs. "The gentlemen you were just talking to has a habit of knocking off his female accomplices. Chances are you'd be next on his list if I don't save you."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"He just killed a blonde he'd been keeping down on Seventy-fourth Street in New York. Cops're after him. That's why he wants to scam to South America."

"I don't believe it!" She was shocked and he didn't think it was pretense.

"I was there when he shot her and tried to frame me for it. He murdered another babe down in Maryland a few weeks ago. Wouldn't surprise me to find a few more dead dames in Bluebeard's closet before we're through. Idea is, he needs sexy-looking dolls to put over his con games, but he wouldn't trust any of you not to give him away in a pinch. So after he uses a babe for a little while, he pushes the button on her. I wouldn't know whether you're really his lawful wedded partner or not, but I'll give long odds you haven't been twining around with him very long. Right?"

"Th—three m—months," she stammered. "You're a detective. You're just making this up to frighten me so I'll tell you about him!"

"I know enough about him to put him in that famous antique chair across the river. I'll give you an idea what I know about him. Sit right there. Don't get up. Better fold your hands in your lap like a good little girl."

He lifted the receiver, asked for Long Distance, and got through to Nimblets in Manhattan. "Mr. Harrison. This is Marko."

"Gee, he's been calling *you* often enough, Mr. Marko! Here he is."

"Bob? Don."

"How you making out?"

"I've found some of that Deshla stuff and a good deal of the other merchandise that we were gypped out of—maybe most of it."

"Where is it?"

"At Congers, up the Hudson on Route Nine-W. Farm belonging to a Fancy Dan interior decorator named Clem Ayerell. Stuff is stored in a big Quonset. Better get some state troopers out here to stand guard over it until we can get the warrants for seizure."

"I hate to bring the authorities into this, Don! But I suppose it's the only way. Why can't you handle it, if you're up there?"

"I have another problem on my hands, Bob."

"That murder business?!"

"Indirectly. I wouldn't worry about too many other people getting the idea this was a sure-fire swindle method. Way it was worked with Nimblets rates it as being fatal to two out of three."

"You damn well better get back here before something happens to make you Number Three, fellow."

"I'm on my way, Boss."

THE redhead frowned as he set the receiver back on the base. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"Not mentioning me." She smiled twistedly. "You see, I lied to you. I'm not married to Clem. I'm Evaline Hurley. My family have been customers of Nimblets for two generations, at least. I know they'll be glad to pay nearly anything to keep my name out of this." She ran the tip of her tongue across her upper lip. "And so would I—if you know what I mean."

"You're the second girl today who's of-

fered to illustrate a bedtime story for me," Don said solemnly. "One of these times I'm going to quit being a Galahad and go for it. But not this time."

Chapter IX

IN HER convertible, Don sat beside Evaline Hurley as she tooled the fast car out to the house gate and pulled the swing rope to open it.

"When you don't call him back," he told her, "he'll know you're with someone who's on the side of the law. He may suspect I was the party who made you hang up on him, but it won't make any difference because he won't trust you now, anyhow. If he gets close to you, you're a gone goose."

"But where can I be safe?" she wailed. "You don't know how daring and resourceful Clem is. He has nerve enough to try *anything*, no matter how risky."

"I'll take you to a place where he can't get at you."

"Oh! You're underestimating him. Everybody does, at first, on account of that pleasant manner of his. I did, God knows. But if you think arresting me and putting me in jail would keep him from getting at me, if he wanted to, you're terribly mistaken."

"That isn't what you're afraid of, if they book you into the Tombs."

"Of course it is! What else!"

He put his left hand on her right knee, pulled her skirt up to show pink flesh and raspberry embroidery on the edge of gauzy nylon. "That." He touched the inside of her thigh about six inches above her knee. A dotting of tiny purple-blue scars freckled the skin.

Her nostrils flared with quick resentment. "He must have told you! The dirty rat!"

"That you are an addict? No, he didn't. Strictly a guess. Partly on account of your eyes. Partly because the kid he shot down on Seventy-fourth had been buying cocaine. Struck me inaybe that might be how this louse kept a hold on his women, by getting them addicted to H or C and threatening to turn them in if they didn't play ball."

She slowed the car to stare at him in awe.

"That's what he did with me. You do seem to know an awful lot about him."

"Learned quite a bit on short acquaintance," Don answered drily. "But you see what might happen if I turned you over to the precinct boys. Pretty soon you'd be needing a lift and then you'd agree to go out on bail when some shyster lawyer of his put up the dough. Once you were out, he'd snap the switch on you and I'd have a dead witness instead of a live one." He pulled her skirt down.

She drove in silence for a while. "If I have to go into court and testify to his—his relations with me, I'd as soon be dead, anyway."

"Maybe we can get around that. If you're cooperative."

Some of the come-on came back to her face. "I'll be the most cooperative little kitten you ever knew," she said fervently.

"I'm going to take you to my apartment."

"Um!" She shot him a provocative side-ward glance. "But if he knows you, he'll find me."

"He won't be able to get at you. I'll have a plainclothes-lad down in the lobby on the lookout for him."

"I'm scared as hell," she admitted. "But if you want the truth, I always have been scared of him, since I first met him."

"Where was that?"

"Coming back from Buenos Aires on one of those vacation cruises. He was so clever and such a good dancer and—and so horribly exciting when he made love to me."

That was probably how he'd met the others, too, Don thought. Daughters of well-to-do families, shipped off to South America for six weeks to get them out of their parents' hair or to break up undesirable affairs. Crazy for romance and ready to try anything once. After they'd tried it with Clem, he'd have them roped.

It wouldn't have been too hard to convince them they wouldn't be running into real trouble even if they got picked up in the store, trying to pass themselves off as society girls accustomed to ordering large quantities of expensive furniture. Probably Clem had coached all of them to do what Suzanne had done when she'd been cornered

by a floor-watcher who'd happened to know the woman the Collinson girl had claimed to be, they would pretend it was just a joke.

"Keep on down the expressway to Fourteenth," he directed her, when they were over the bridge. It's on Christopher."

"How long do you expect me to stay with you?"

HE WAS evasive. "Can't tell. Worrying about your 'lift'?"

"I have a little." She touched the handbag at her side. "But by tomorrow—"

"There's a doc who's a pal of mine. If you feel like breaking the habit—I'm not preaching, you understand—but he could help you get off it."

She drew a deep breath. "If it doesn't mean going to one of those hideous institutions, that's the thing I want to do most in the world!"

"All right. We'll see about it." He told her where to park.

Upstairs in the apartment he said; "See, Evaline, I'm taking you strictly on faith. You can scam out of here as soon's I'm gone."

"Are you going right away?" She was disappointed.

"Yes. You can beat it, five minutes after. I leave, if you want to. But then we'd get you sooner or later, and your family would be dragged into it. Even if Clem didn't put the dot on you first."

"I'll be here when you get back." She came up close to him. "I want you to know how grateful I am for not—making things worse for me."

She kissed him. She held her lips on his until he disengaged her arms gently.

"Okay. If you're really grateful—" he pointed to the desk in the bookcase corner—"sit down and write out everything you can remember about that Red Bank business. From the beginning. What Ayerell told you to do, what you did, who you saw at our store, every last damn particular. Especially about the big red-headed guy."

"I don't know any big red-headed guy. You couldn't call Clem big."

"No. Tough. But not big. Know a man named Benny?"

Evaline shook her head. "No. I never heard of him. Maybe he's the one in the store. I'm sure Clem had someone in Nimblets tipping him off which accounts to charge to."

"Sure. He'd have to. He wasn't trying his tricks on any other store." He patted her arm. "Keep the door locked. Even if you hear somebody holler 'Fire.' I'll use my key when I come in."

WHEN he got back to his office Cora gaped at him. "For goodness sake, Mr. Marko! What did that girl do to you?"

He looked at the slip on his desk. It had the red "Urgent" sticker on it. "I found things a little rough up there," he murmured.

His secretary took out her handkerchief, dabbed at his chin. "She might have been discreet enough to wipe off her lipstick!"

Don said absently, "Oh, that was another girl."

Cora sniffed. "And it's all I can do to get you to treat me to coffee once in a while. What have they got that I lack?"

He grinned. "Elastic morals, honey. What's this from Eddrop's office?"

"That snippety little assistant of his—you know, the one with the horsetail hair-do and the prissy little mouth?"

"Meoww."

"Uh-huh. I could be catty about Miss Wrenn. Anyhoo, she says Mr. Eddrop's left the office and she can't get him at his hotel and she wants to speak to you about him just the instant you get in."

"Hah!" He glanced at his watch. "Put in a little overtime tonight, will you? I might need you." He hung up his raincoat.

"I'll be pretty mild company, I'm afraid, after the B girls you seem to have been waltzing around with. She went back to her typewriter."

He found Miss Wrenn in Ralph Eddrop's private cubicle where he was accustomed to interview customers who wanted to open charge accounts. She was a small, slim, bony girl who used an oddly orangeish shade of rouge. Her lipstick was an off-tone, too. Her eyes were large and limpid. She gazed at Don almost piteously.

"I don't know what to do, Mr. Marko."

"What's the problem?"

"Well—" she hesitated—"I feel like a nasty little ingrate, after Mr. Eddrop's been so kind to me and everything. But the way I look at it, I owe something to the organization, as well as to Mr. Eddrop."

DON said, "You think he's been up to no good?"

"I don't know, Mr. Marko. That's the trouble. I may get him in wrong by talking when he hasn't done a single thing he shouldn't have."

"Better let me be the judge of that."

"Well, I do hope I'm wrong. But there's been something queer going on about those credit tokens, the little coins with Nimblets and the customer's name and charge number stamped on them."

"What's queer?"

"The bill from the stamping company that makes them up for us—Gothametal Die and Stamping—came in last week and he took it out of the file, Mr. Eddrop did. After a couple of days a new bill came in and it wasn't for the same amount. It billed us for only 121 new coins instead of 127 like the first one. Mr. Eddrop okayed that and passed it for payment, but he never did mention the first bill. And I remembered checking the coins when they came—they send them by registered mail, you see—and I'm positive there were 127 charge tokens, but on the list he gave me to make out for new customers, there were only 121." Miss Wrenn was almost tearful. "I wouldn't have thought another thing about it, of course, if it hadn't been for this mess in the furniture department. And I hate so to say anything that might get Mr. Eddrop in trouble."

Don said, "He's had his share already today, that's a fact. Could you come back after supper tonight for a couple of hours? I might want to go over this again."

Miss Wrenn smiled primly. "I'd love to help you, Mr. Marko."

"Say eight o'clock, then."

Chapter X

SLOWLY Cora hung up the phone. "They say she's 'satisfactory,' Mr. Marko, though how a fractured skull can be satis-

factory, I can't see. But she won't be able to see anyone for twenty-four hours at least."

Don looked up from the employee cards he was studying. "By then, whatever she might have to tell me wouldn't be much help. What'd headquarters say when you phoned in that description of Clem?"

"“There'll be an officer around here in a few minutes. You're to wait for him.”"

Don stuck the stack of cards in his pocket. "That's what *he* thinks. I'm on my way."

Cora was exasperated. "What'll I tell the policeman?"

"To be sure to add to his bulletin that Clem is gun-goofy. He'd rather shoot somebody than furnish a new home. Stick with it. I'll buzz you here in a little while. I hope."

He went down the private elevator, out the employees' exit, stopping briefly to ask the door guard a question. Then he taxied to the Calabria, an ancient hostelry on East Twenty-eighth.

The desk clerk was an amiable Mahatma Ghandi in a salt-and-pepper double-breasted suit and a bright azure bow tie.

"Mr. Eddrop? No sir, haven't seen him around since he left this morning, sir. But I'll try his room for you." He plugged in on the antiquated switchboard, worked the jack without result.

Don opened his wallet to show his Nimblets "Chief of Store Protection" card. "Anyone call here to see him while he was out, happen to remember?"

"No, sir." The clerk's eyes crinkled. "Mr. Eddrop has practically no visitors, you might say. But he often has phone calls and goes out to visit his—ah—friends. Is there anything wrong, sir?"

"Afraid there may be. Would these friends of his be feminine?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to encourage gossip, sir. But since you're from his place of business, and if he's in any kind of trouble, I'm sure you wouldn't pass along any—ah—scandal—"

"I wouldn't."

"Feel sure of it, sir. I've been in this business long enough to be able to size a man up pretty well. You look reliable to me."

"Thanks. He has a gal pal, then?"

"I believe you might draw that conclu-

sion, sir. He's quite often what we call a sleep-out, sir. Doesn't use his bed at all. The maid always reports those things. Couple of times a week he never comes to the hotel at night at all."

Don smiled. "Old boy's single. No law says he can't go stepping. Would she be in town, or out in Westchester, or Long Island?"

The clerk tapped his prominent teeth with a yellow pencil. "I don't wish to send you off on a wild goose chase, sir. But he frequently calls a Regent number."

"Happen to have any record of it?"

Mahatma touched an index finger to his bony forehead. "In here, only. Regent 1—6643, to the best of my recollection."

"You do all right for a young fellow. Would it be possible for you to take me up to his room? I don't want to notify the police and go through the routine of getting a search warrant—if Eddrop turns up all right."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, sir. I couldn't leave the desk all alone. But since you have a legitimate interest in Mr. Eddrop's well-being, I could let you take the pass key for a few minutes. I don't think there'll be any harm in that."

"Good deal," Don agreed. "Keep the hotel's name out of the papers if there should be any disagreeable publicity. What's his room?"

"Three-nine." The clerk jingled a key ring. "You won't disturb any of his things? I wouldn't like him to feel that we were permitting any liberties with his possessions."

"He'll never know I've been up there." Don took the keys.

THE credit man's room was as neat as a newly opened box of cigars. The things on the bureau and in it were arranged with military precision. Hairbrush, comb, clothes-brush, link-box, photograph of an elderly woman whose round, sad face resembled Eddrop's markedly. Shirts, sox, underclothing, all stacked in clean piles. Suits on hangers, shoes on trees. Even the ties on the rack fixed to the closet door had all the reds and browns on one side, the greens and blues on the other.

There were books on the table. *Function of Credit in Commercial Management, Theory of Time Payment Liabilities, Department Store Policies*, more of similar nature. Ralph Eddrop kept his hotel quarters neat, whatever he did outside.

The medicine cabinet in the bathroom was equally tidy. Soap in wrappers, shaving cream, toothbrush, bottles and bottles of patent remedies. Hair restorer. Deodorant. Toilet water. Laxatives. Tonics. Vitamins. And on the second shelf a small gilt cylinder tucked behind a box of headache tablets. Don took it out, removed the gold cap, dabbed some of the stuff on the back of his left hand.

"I wonder what Cora would think of that," he muttered, dropping the recapped cylinder in his pocket.

Downstairs again, he returned the keys to the desk clerk with thanks. "Nothing up there to help much. But I'll let you know what we find out. You can tell Mr. Eddrop I was here, if he comes in."

"I trust you turn up nothing of an unfortunate nature, sir."

"So do I."

Don walked to Madison, to a drug store. In the phone booth he called his office.

Cora spoke loudly. "Mr. Marko's office.—no sir, he's not here."

"Ho! You have an official eavesdropper, hah?"

"Yes sir, I'll tell him." The secretary was jittery.

"Does he have a warrant for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Keep him amused, honey. Can you remember a message for Maxie?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Ask him to check with Joe Kelly down at the telephone company. I want to know the address of the subscriber listed as Regent 1—6643. Got that?"

"Right."

"Have Maxie ring me up at—wait a minute. I'm at Bryant 5-8017."

"Thank you, sir. I'll tell him, soon's he comes in."

He bought an evening paper, read the story under the headline:

NUDE GIRL KILLED
MURDERER HUNTED
IN BRUTAL BUTCHERY

The facts were a little garbled. The user of the shotgun was reported as having been an elderly man—that could have come from Clem's notifying the cops about Don's white hair. The shooting was alleged to have taken place after a violent lovers' quarrel—that was strictly newspaper mahaha. Any nude female corpse would have to be the aftermath of a crime of passion. But there was no suggestion of any third party having been present and apparently none of the neighbors had come up with a description of Clem as the man who must often have visited Suzanne in the apartment.

The next editions, he reflected, would blazon Clem's name and description across the front pages. Also, he thought uncomfortably, they might have one or two more demises to record, if Don himself didn't work at top speed.

The phone in the booth jangled. It was Maxie.

"I got that subscriber, Boss." The pick-pocket specialist was agitated.

"Who?"

"You coulda knocked me over with a whiff of Chanel Five. That phone's in the name of Ralph Eddrop."

"At what address?"

"Two twenty-five Jane. In the Village. Know where it is?"

"About three blocks from my place on Christopher, Maxie. Thanks."

"Y'need any help, Boss?"

"Just hold the fort, Maxie. The cavalry's in my office, already."

"You don't know the half of it. The G.M. is popping his top."

"Go in and hold his hand. I'll buzz you back."

HE CABBED to Jane Street. Two twenty-five was a new four-story walkup apartment house.

Ralph Eddrop's name was on the 2-A bell. But the door in the little lobby was open on the latch. Marko went up without ringing.

There was another bell beside the door on the second floor landing. He thumbed it.

After a while a tense male voice, Eddrop's voice, inquired, "Yes?"

"Janitor." Don disguised his voice as

well as he could. "We got to get in there. They's a gas leak."

The door opened. Eddrop gawked at him.

Over the credit man's shoulder Don could see into the living room, where a pair of girl's shoes stood beside a footstool.

Eddrop stammered, "You—you can't—come in—here!"

Don put a hand on the credit man's chest. "I am in, Ralph." He walked in, shoving Eddrop before him.

A door slammed. The bathroom door.

Don said, "Tell Miss Wrenn to come on out, Ralph. I can't very well bust down the door while she's in the john."

Chapter XI

EDDROP began to protest, "There's no one here!" Then he saw the shoes, stopped.

Don tried the bathroom door. She'd locked it.

He called, "Never mind whether you're dressed or not, Miss Wrenn. Come on out."

Eddrop put trembling fingers to his still swollen lips: "Really, Don! This seems so unnecessarily high-handed!"

The store protection chief regarded him with disgust. "What'd you call what she did in the corridor outside my office this morning? Half killed Mary Bayard! Slugged you in the mouth when you tried to prevent her from beating Mary's brains out while she lay there on the floor! And you didn't even have the guts to put the finger on her, after that! Don't talk to me about being high-handed after the way you've let her hook you into cheating the store all these months. Get over there on that phone. Call my office. Ask for Cora. Tell her where I am. Say that anyone who wants to see me will find me here! Jump!"

The man obeyed meekly.

Don held the gun at his hip, kept the muzzle on the bathroom door.

Eddrop gave Nimblett's number to the operator.

The bathroom door flew open. The Wrenn girl, in nothing much beneath a Japanese-embroidered kimono, crouched by the washbowl. A snub-nosed, nicked automatic was

clenched in her right fist.

Don looked at her steadily. "You want to trade? This one of mine'll make a hole you could put a crowbar through."

She lowered the nickel-plated weapon.

Don said, "Throw it out here on the rug."

She did. He picked it up.

Eddrop was talking to Cora. "—that's what he said—anyone who wants him can find him here. Yes."

Don gestured at the girl with his gun. "That's so your blood-thirsty playmate will find a reception committee if he calls here this evening—which I guess was what you had in mind when you told Ralph to meet you here at your cuddle-up, hah?"

She cursed him out in colorful language.

He laughed unhumorously. "You'll completely disillusion Ralph, if you haven't done it already. How long since you seduced the poor old dodo?"

She snarled, "That's a good one! *He* got *me* into this with his nice, quiet, gentlemanly bushwah! He engineered the whole thing. I've been sick of him for weeks but I didn't know how to break off with him and not lose my job."

Eddrop, from across the room, said dully, "I don't suppose I cut a very good figure as a sugar-daddy, Benny, but I don't think you ought to lie about me and mislead Mr. Marko. I didn't put you up to anything, you know, except this apartment."

Don said, "Benny. That's what the watchman said some of the girls called you. On our cards you're listed as Ruth A. Wrenn. What is that—your middle name?"

She told him to go to hell.

Eddrop continued mildly, "You might as well tell Mr. Marko. They're bound to find out, just as I knew sooner or later they'd find out about those duplicate coins you made me order." He looked at Don. "Her middle name is Abenita. Benny for short."

Don raised his eyebrows. "Oh? Well! I have a message for you, Benny. From a friend of yours."

Benny told him that she wasn't interested in any messages.

"From Suzanne Collinson," he said. "She gave the message to me just before she died." He hadn't expected her to show any sur-

prise at the news of the blonde's death, and she didn't. "She said to tell you that Clem had shot her and I was to let you know and you'd square things up with him."

Benny cried frantically, "It's a lousy, rotten lie! Clem wouldn't have hurt Sue for anything. You killed her yourself. And he'll get you for it, too!" She flung out an arm accusingly.

Don squinted at her, puzzled. She wasn't making that defense for his benefit, or Eddrop's, either. Behind her, in the mirror of the medicine cabinet he saw a growing panel of light. The hall door, opening.

He dived for the corner of the room behind the chair where Benny had taken off her shoes. Shots thundered in the small living room. Glass shattered. Metal whined.

ON HIS knees he pivoted, peeking over the arm of the chair. Clem Ayerell sauntered jauntily in from the hall, a .45 automatic held in front of him like a torch, with smoke trailing from the uptilted muzzle instead of flame. There was no red bandanna covering his face this time, and Don saw why the mask had been so necessary. A black patch covered the man's left eye. It was fastened around his head with a black cord. Even with the disfiguring patch, the fellow was remarkably good-looking. His big even teeth showed in a grin of delight.

He fired again at Don. The bullet hit the arm of the chair. Dust spurted in Marko's eyes, blinded him. He shot aimlessly, cursing, heard Clem's laugh in answer.

He rolled behind the chair, blinking desperately to get back partial vision.

Benny screamed, "Clem! Look out! Ralph!"

Clem's voice came calmly. "Wait'll I fix the man. I'll attend to the mouse later."

Don could see a little, through stinging tears. He lifted his gun, raised his head. Anything was better than getting blasted without putting up a fight.

But he didn't shoot. Eddrop stood between him and Clem. Kept moving to stay between them as Clem circled, trying to get a clear aim at Don.

"You can finish me, Ayerell," the credit man was saying grimly. "I'm ready for it.

You've corrupted me, and Benny has debauched me until I'm done for, anyway. I want to go. I couldn't face them at the store any more."

Clem put the automatic to Eddrop's stomach, pulled the trigger.

Don saw Ralph double over like a jack-knife, then straighten slowly and take a few tottering steps toward his attacker. He flung his arms out, grabbed Clem as the gunman poked the muzzle at his chest and fired again.

Eddrop's body jerked like a toy on a string, but he clung to Ayerell's arms until his grip slid to the man's waist, his legs.

Benny screeched, "Clem! Clem! Get out! The cops are on their way!"

Clem aimed painstakingly at the top of Eddrop's head. Don shot with his hand braced against the side of the chair. Clem's smile vanished. He closed his mouth, opened it again. Don shot once more.

Clem and Eddrop crumpled to the floor like brawlers in a street fight.

Benny ran shrieking to the hall.

A bulky figure in blue grabbed her at the door, calling,

"All right, you in there! Heave ya guns out here! Before we have to come in and blow ya t' pieces."

Don got up shakily. "Officer, come in and get 'em yourself. They're both dead ducks."

Chapter XII

NOW the apartment was crowded with humans and full of the smell of death. Ambulances had taken along the bodies of the two men. The patrol wagon had swallowed a wildcat Abenita. Don Marko lounged on the chair that had saved his life—or nearly cost him his life, he couldn't make up his mind which.

Cora was there and Bob Harrison and Maxie, in addition to four men from Homicide and a lucky reporter for the City News Syndicate.

Don was sourly waving aside congratulations. "Don't make any damn hero out of me. If I'd used my head, Eddrop wouldn't be dead, and they might have caught Ayerell alive. First time I heard about Benny I

should have figured the name referred to a girl, because even then it was pretty clear butcher-boy Clem got dames to do all his dirty work."

Cora stood up for Don. "Her name wasn't Benita or Abenita on our records. *I'd* never heard her called that."

"The girls in the credit department must have, though," he said. "I should have checked on them, soon as it began to look as if the credit coins were phony."

The general manager chewed on an expensive cigar. "They weren't phony. That was the worst of it, Don."

"Oh, no," Don said. They were the McCoy. Benny looked over the accounts, followed the society columns, and found out which of our big customers were due to be away on winter vacations. Then she made Eddrop order duplicate coins for a few of those accounts, as we do when they're lost, anyway. When the tokens came in, she'd give them to Clem. She'd pass them on to the particular feminine stooge he'd selected to do the job. He couldn't use any of them more than once, naturally, or they'd have been spotted by someone of the sales force in the furniture or floor coverings or draperies departments. But probably he kidded the babes along, told them they'd try it on another store later. Then as soon as the job was over, he'd knock them off, the way he did the dame down there at the Deshla place in Maryland."

Maxie asked, "Why'd he stick to furniture, with what looked like an easy graft like that?"

Don was astonished to see how his fingers trembled when he lit a cigarette. "He was a decorator. Got jobs for doing over big country places from the swanky set. Soon's he'd get an order from some of that hot-buttered *bon bon*, I suppose he sent one of the babes into our store and ordered exactly what he needed to fill his contract. Only, instead of having it charged to Mrs. Ritzbitz, he used the Deshla coin and name. When the stuff got down there in our truck, he'd be there to get it unloaded and ship it back in his own truck to the job he was doing or else to his Quonset hut out in Congers, to wait for the time it'd be needed."

"Mary busted that up," Cora said.

"And got busted to hell herself, for doing it." Don blamed himself. "I should've been on the lookout for an inside worker right then."

The general manager defended him. "I don't know why you should have. We haven't had a Nimbletts employee go bad on us for years. In anything as big as this, I mean. I hate most mightily to have it come out that our assistant credit manager was a crook."

"Maybe it won't have to come out," Don suggested. "Eddrop kind of paid his bill, there at the last. If that Benny hellcat doesn't insist on dragging his name into her trial—which won't be necessary if she pleads guilty to conspiracy for grand larceny—I'd say we could talk to the D.A. about making Eddrop simply a victim of a crazy butcher."

Cora said, "He was such a nice little man."

Don agreed. "Not a bad guy until this Benny got a job in his department and suckered him into making love to her. After that, she could get him to do anything she waited him to, because he'd have been afraid of scandal at the store. But he evened it up pretty well. The way he walked into that gun would have broken your heart."

The G.M. nodded. "One of the few instances where the pig stabbed the butcher. Let's do what we can to keep his name clean, Don."

CORA asked, "Did Clem come here after you, Mr. Marko? Or after Mr. Eddrop?"

"Oh, after Ralph. Benny knew the game was up when she heard about Suzanne's murder. So she decided to make Ralph the fall guy. She gave me a long rigmarole about Ralph's finagling with the credit coins, then arranged to run right up here and meet him, hold him here until Clem came. She'd given Clem a key to this apartment. I'd say she knew Clem was going to kill the poor guy. What she probably didn't know was that he'd have shot her, too. He hated leaving loose ends around that might trip him up."

Maxie moved to avoid one of the Homicide photographers. "You ain't said how you come to find this cuddle-up, Boss."

"Clerk at Ralph's hotel remembered the phone number he used to call three-four times a week. And up in his room I found a lipstick of that Congo orange Miss Wrenn used all the time. I couldn't imagine a bird like Ralph carrying around anything like that unless she'd happened to drop it in his pocket some time when they'd been out together."

Cora touched his arm. "Aren't they going to let you go home pretty quick? You look shot to pieces."

He smiled. "You ought to see the other guy, honey. No, they'll have me making depositions until midnight. But I wish you'd call Doc Towbin for me."

"You want him to come here?" his secretary was solicitous.

"Oh, no. I'd like to have him run down to my apartment and take a peek at a gal pal of mine who needs a little help."

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Oh, you're impossible!"

"Incorrigible is the word." He smiled. "Go phone him, like a good girl." • • •



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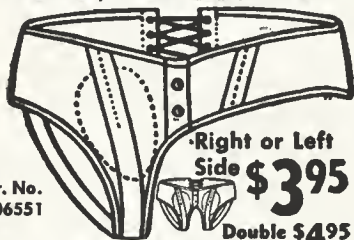
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The Black Cross

by Will Cole

CROSS-COUNTRY running is probably just about the most unspectacular and least popular of all American sports. But it once solved a murder, and a particularly heinous one, at that.

The curtain on the macabre melodrama came up in the still hours of an early morn-

A trainload of police waited for a murderer to flaunt his death sign

ing in June, 1921. Mrs. George H. Coughlin arose in the darkened bedroom of her Norristown, Pa., home with a start. She wondered troubledly for a moment what had awakened her, then began giving herself over to sleep once again. Then suddenly she was sitting bolt upright in bed and shaking her husband.

"I thought I heard Blakely cry out," she told him. "There was something strange about it—like it was stifled."

Sleepily, Mr. Coughlin made his way out

of bed and to their boy's room. But a second later he was very much awake. His eyes darted about the room in alarm. Eighteen-month-old Blakely was missing! And a window was ominously open. The father looked out. There was a ladder propped against the house.

The local police regarded the whole thing as being almost too fantastic for reality. Who ever heard of anything like that occurring in Norristown? And who'd want to kidnap the Coughlin child anyway—the father was just an average sort of business man, by no means wealthy. The police acted as if they suspected the parents of the happening as much as anybody else.

But a few days later a letter came to the Coughlins through the mail. Signed "The Crank," it was from the kidnaper and demanded \$12,000. The frantic father scraped up the money; it was every cent he had. He left it behind a railroad depot as had been requested.

But nothing happened. Except that the money had vanished and that sometime afterwards he received another letter from "The Crank," this one demanding still another \$12,000 for the return of the child. The father was instructed to get on a certain Philadelphia-bound express train with the money, sit by an open window and to toss the money out at the sight of a white flag with a black cross on it.

Broke and desperate, Mr. Coughlin called on Major Lynn G. Adams, head of the State Police. Adams told him to take the train and toss out a bag at the signal, but instead of money to have a note in it saying he didn't have the cash and would need a little time to gather it up. Sure enough, along one of the wooded stretches on the route, the black cross could be seen fluttering ominously among the trees. Coughlin flung the bag out of the window.

Adams told the distraught father that he was sure he'd hear from the kidnaper again. In the meantime, he issued orders to his men the like of which probably have never been given to any law-enforcement personnel. He instructed them to go into cross-country running training, to practice going not only

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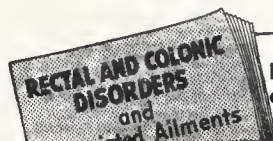
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over long distances, but difficult terrain.

After some time had passed, it came—another letter from the kidnaper. This one gave the same instructions as before.

There was, of course, still no way of knowing at just what stretch of woods the black cross would suddenly show itself this time. But now Major Adams had his men stationed at various points along the way. And along with the express there was another train, a "blind" full of officers.

The journey began. Stretch after stretch of woodland went by. Nothing happened. And then, suddenly, from the trees the fluttering black cross appeared. Coughlin tossed an empty bag out of the window. But this time something else happened. State patrolmen displayed a prearranged signal of their own—some cardboard in the windows of their train, which came to a stop as soon as possible.

The kidnaper didn't have a chance. In tip-top, razor-sharp condition, the converted "cross-country runners" had the kidnaper in their grasp only minutes after he had picked up the bag.

He turned out to be a bearded man named August Pascal. He admitted kidnaping the Coughlin child and revealed that he had smothered it to death while making off with it and had tossed the body in a river. He was sentenced to prison for life.

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"I was able to play many pieces in a short time. Family and friends certainly surprised. Course opened door to popularity, wider circle of friends. Recently I entered amateur contest—won First Prize."—*Peter H. Kozyna, Manitoba, Canada*



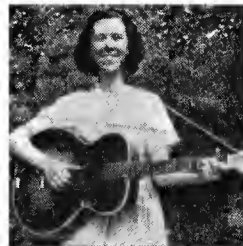
Course Inspires Music Circle

Shown above is Miss Mildred Cade, of Houston, Texas. She and a number of her friends are so enthusiastic about the U. S. School of Music's quick easy way of learning that they've ALL taken it up.



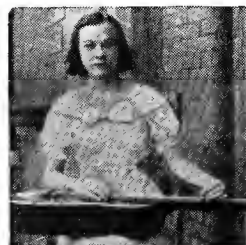
Plays Banjo in a Short Time

"Enjoy your lessons for the Tenor Banjo, am progressing rapidly. Lessons are so simple, anyone can understand; yet so thorough I have learned to play by note in little more than a month!"—*Andrew Schneider, Hanna, Wyoming.*



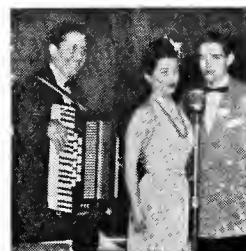
"Can't Thank Your School Enough"

"Never studied music before. Your method is easy; being your own teacher is best. After 4 lessons, I could play a few pieces. Now play any piece I like. Can't thank you enough."—*Rose Boyer, Blackwell, Mo.*



Learns Foster Without Teacher

"I have no special talent — but thanks to you I play my guitar better than many who have taken lessons from teachers longer, and naturally at higher cost."—*Myrella-Muquette Saint Andre, Montreal, Canada.*



Now a Famous Orchestra Leader

"I got my start in music with a U. S. School Course. How easy it is to learn to read notes, play an instrument, this 'teach-yourself' way! I've enrolled my two daughters."—*Lawrence Weik.*

You, too, can play any instrument— By this EASY A-B-C Method

You think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument — the piano, accordion, violin, guitar, saxophone or some other favorite. But they denied themselves the pleasure — because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn!

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home — without a private teacher — without tedious study — and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn!

900,000 Students!

The result? Over 900,000 men and women have taken up music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good times, and popularity.

NOTICE

Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear." We teach you easily and quickly to play *real music*, any music by standard notes—not by any trick or number system.

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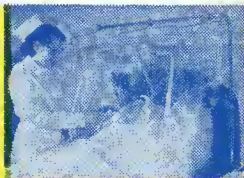
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